

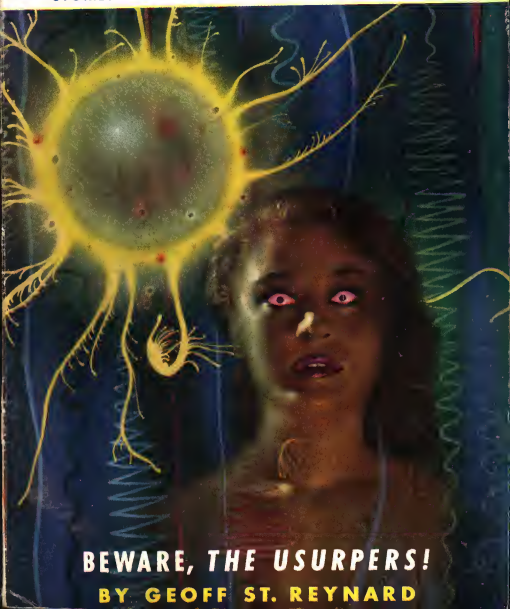
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IMAGINATION

NOVEMBER 1951

35c

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY



BEWARE, THE USURPERS!

BY GEOFF ST. REYNARD

Introducing the



AUTHOR

★
Geoff St. Reynard
★

WELL, let's try being factual. I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, and have lived here most of my life, with occasional excursions to California, Arizona, and Mexico. I'm on the right side of forty but the wrong side of thirty, and that's near enough. Have held the usual variety of jobs in the palaeontological lab of a museum, a food plant, beer-refrigeration salesroom (smack! drool!), ad agency, dairy supply house, and a big war plant. Also have been a farm hand (*once* I had muscles) . . . I can explain the old query about why a writer always manages to do so many other things. He often gets hungry.

I'm so used to "St. Reynard" that I sometimes feel my own name is a nom de plume; but under it (Krepps) I've had two novels published in this country and in Sweden (latest one, *The Courts of the Lion*, now avail-

able in a 35c Bantam reprint — adv't.) besides yarns in *Collier's*, *Argosy*, *Adventure*, and other mags too few to mention. Enough of this insufferable bragging — let's get to the fantasy.

Unknown Worlds bought my first story in '43, and folded a month later. So far as I know there wasn't any connection between the two events. Shortly thereafter I sold a couple of pieces to FA, which printed nearly all my fantasy between '44 and '51. Naturally, when Bill Hamling left FA to publish *Madge*, I came with him. We've always got on so well together, except when he made me rewrite half of the present yarn!

Maybe it'd be of infinitesimal interest to the readers to know how I got started writing fantasy and stf. From constant reading, of course. The
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The Editorial

WE'RE going to devote a portion of the editorial this issue to what we think is a very important subject: science fiction. We stress the latter word because to an alarming degree it would seem as if the current emphasis in the field would be just the reverse.

NO one can question the fact that today science fiction enjoys a peak of popularity unprecedented in its history. Then genre has branched into the hard cover book field with dozens of titles being issued annually. The big slicks such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's* and many others, are featuring science fiction stories every two or three issues. And of course radio, television, and the movies see the field as the probable successor to the heretofore leaders of the media, western and detective stories.

ALL of which is certainly to the good and we wouldn't want to change it an iota. But along with this growing popularity—which will increase as time goes on because of the very nature of our present world technology—a rather disturbing lack of proper direction has become apparent.

AT no period in science fiction's history has there been a time when more magazines on the newsstands were devoted exclusively to the subject. One would think that with all the expanding channels for

the field a definite idea of the need for science fiction would be recognized. Such, unhappily, is not the case.

TO put it bluntly, science fiction is in a stage of growing pains. We hear the cry from various circles that science fiction must *grow up*! That what we need are thought-provoking ideas in the stories that may project man's current problems into the future and solve them, or at least, to show us the error of our ways. In a nutshell, it would appear that because of the awakened interest in science fiction, our one purpose is to educate the new mass audience whose interest has been captured.

WE maintain that this is a fundamental error in editorial thinking. There is only one purpose for science fiction, just as there has always been—and that is to *entertain*!

THROUGHOUT the field today we can see the uncertain jockeying for proper editorial slant to stories. The conventional science fiction story which has proven very popular—and which indeed was the very thing that captured the interest of the nation—is now frowned upon. The trend in some circles is away from the *recapist* adventure, suspense, and solid action story, to the so-called *adult* or intellectual type of story. Some publishers, editors and writers have viewed the new audience potential and cried in

sudden uncertainty: "My Gawd, we've got to educate these people!"

WE think this is a very important point to be mulled over by all concerned at this time. It is our opinion that nothing will be a surer means of retarding the popularity of science fiction than this growing tendency to educate readers rather than entertain them.

TAKE a good look at the western field. The movies have made millions of dollars over the years with fast action westerns. They made millions because *the majority of the after-pocers wanted that type of entertainment!* On occasion the movie industry would produce and release a truly adult type of western, such as "The Ox-bow Incident". We were very much impressed with the film and certainly it achieved fine critical acclaim. And yet we were surprised to learn that the film was not a box-office hit. Plainly and simply, it was too high-brow. It made you stop and think, and perhaps shudder at some of the social implications it portrayed.

THIS should teach us a good lesson. People do not want an education in their relaxed moments at the movies or at home with a copy of one of their favorite magazines. They want to be entertained. And entertainment in fiction is purely and simply escapist. For a brief while the reader wants to experience vicariously the thrills of the hero who is his fictional-identity at the moment. He does not care to be treated to a scientific narration into technology or sociology.

TIME magazine reported in its June 25th issue of this year on an article that had appeared in the

current *Harper's*, written by Arthur L. Mayer, executive vice president of the Council of Motion Picture Organizations. It was the opinion of Mr. Mayer that for the most part the good films (i. e. those receiving critical acclaim) were flops at the box-office; similarly, the bad ones, which had been panned by the critics, made a pile of money.

THIS of course brings us to the question, just what is a good story? The mere fact that a critic (in science fiction or otherwise) pans a story does not necessarily mean it is a bad story. The real critic is the man or woman who buys a ticket at the box-office or a copy of a magazine. If they like what they read or see a story's value can be determined.

UNFORTUNATELY, it seems to us, some people in responsible positions in the science fiction field today have viewed the great new potential audience and have been stricken by an editorial palsy. Fearful, perhaps, of losing the interest of this large mass of American public they have cast aside the fundamental purpose for any story—entertainment—and sincerely believe that what the reader wants is a two-hour education in the semantics of future trends.

IT is true, perhaps, that a certain segment of any audience may desire educational reading. But experience yields a long yardstick and it shows in no uncertain measurements that the majority of people want to be entertained with a good story of action, adventure, and suspense.

A VERY recent indication of this can be seen from Hollywood.

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BEWARE, THE USURPERS!

by GEOFF ST. REYNARD



Have you ever seen monsters stalking the streets? Only if you're drunk, you say? — Don't laugh—your best friend could be one of them! . . .



I STOPPED the black Jaguar beside the crumbling stone balustrade and swung my legs out. The drive was deep in rotted leaves and long-uncleared trash. Above me the ancient castle looked out across the groves of oak and elm and chestnut to the silent moors, like the veritable ghost of Old England itself: aloof, brooding, noble, withdrawn from this hectic modern age into its memories. Blind blank holes of windows stared over my head as I walked up the drive where in a more

recent century the carriages of dukes and knights and princes of the blood must have rolled, the big horses of neighboring squires must have pawed impatiently before many a hunt and lovers in satin and velvet and cascading lace must have strolled and dallied a thousand thousand times.

As I was hauling open the heavy iron-banded door, my foot trod upon something that squashed unpleasantly. I bent down, and in the sick yellow moonlight saw a newly-dead rook, its eyes already pecked out. I shivered, uncontrollably. Then I went in and pulled the door shut.

My electric torch stabbing the darkness before me, I crossed the

empty hall and mounted the broad curving stairs. At the top I turned and glanced downward; the great hall was patterned with moonlight, and although there was no furniture of any sort, the whole vast place seemed to crawl and pulse with shapes of menace, of dead-yet-living evil. I shook myself angrily. My nerves were rotten, my mind was bursting with fear. That was the whole trouble — fear, fear and nerves. The only thing to do was act quickly.

I strode down the dank passageway, opened the third door on the left, went into the room and shut the door behind me.

Here the old stone walls were ashine with lights, the air was less musty and far less creepy. Six people were here, standing about or sitting on straightbacked chairs. They all turned to look at me. Nobody spoke. I nodded to each in turn.

THERE was an old army officer, leathered and permanently tanned by decades of the dreadful Indian sun; he wore a short grizzled mustache and a stern, rather stuffy expression. There was a man of about fifty who could not have been anything but a physician, so scrubbed and competent he seemed. There was a youngish fellow with only one arm, and another whose dark glasses sheltered sightless scarpitted hollows. There was an antique of a man, poker-thin and poker-straight and poker-hard, with a

pale face and keen, faded blue eyes. And there was a girl, who had sometimes been described as a summer sky, as a star, and as other things just as lovely and unbelievable.

"What ho," I said, with empty cheerfulness. "Sorry to be late. Let's get at it."

"Will," said the doctor abruptly, "I forbid it. It's madness, it's criminal lunacy."

"Sorry you feel that way, John. We've gone too far to stop here—and we've been all through this a hundred times." I went to the table and sat down briskly in the vacant chair beside it. Truth to tell, every muscle in my body was rebelling, was shrieking to me that John Baringer was right; only my mind still insisted that he was wrong, and I knew that if I dallied for an instant my body would conquer my brain . . .

I fitted my head snugly against the curious apparatus we had attached to the back of the chair. It was constructed along the lines of an old-fashioned photographer's head clamp. To the table were nailed a number of steel braces, which held a Tower musket, an obsolete firearm primed with black powder and aimed rigidly so that the load would pass within a hair's breadth of my eyes as I sat with my head pressed against the clamp. The musket was already cocked. "Let 'er go," I said, and felt glad that my voice had not cracked into falsetto.

"No!" said John Baringer. "No!"

None of them moved.

"Have I got to do it myself?" I asked, rather angrily.

The retired officer pushed the doctor aside, took two steps forward and laid his hand on the musket. "Ready?" he asked.

"I am."

"Hold hard," he said, and pulled the trigger.

The world seemed to lift up into the air all at once, its foundations tearing apart with a noise like all hell bursting in half; then it slowly toppled down again, and everything was blackness and hot, searing death.

The last thing I remember was the scream of the beautiful girl, she who was as lovely as a summer sky.

CHAPTER II

I LAY in the warm bed and for a long time I tried to think of something that I knew I should recall, and at last, after hours of waking and dozing and waking again, I had it; it was the fact that I was not dead. When I knew this for certain I was extremely surprised, in the weak fashion of the very ill. I slept once more, and when I woke again I was stronger and more in command of my mind. I was still a little astonished that I was alive. Then I began to wonder whether I was blind. The knowledge that I would not know about this for some days was intolerable. I yelled an-

grily, and a cool hand was laid across my lips.

"Gently, Will, gently," said the loveliest voice in England.

Then I knew that I could bear the uncertainty till doomsday, if I must.

"Hello, Marion." I said, brushing the hand with my dry lips. "What time is it?"

"Middle of the afternoon, Will. You've been asleep a long while. It's Tuesday."

"Tuesday. Good Lord, nearly forty-eight hours!"

"Do your eyes hurt?"

"Not much."

"Thank John for that."

"Where is he?"

"Here," said the physician's voice. "We're all here but the Colonel."

"He's in London," said Marion Black, "buying supplies."

"Is Johnson here?"

"Yes, sir," said the respectful voice of the pale-faced old man. "Very much at sea, if you'll allow me, Mister Chester."

"They haven't told you, Johnson?" I asked incredulously. "You must think us all mad!"

"No, sir," said he promptly, "I give you my word I don't, sir. Had it been one or two of you, why then I might fancy you'd gone off your respective rockers, as you might say, sir; but six of you—that's different."

"What do you think, then, Johnson?"

"I think there's something big going on, sir," said the old man. "Something fearfully big. With poor

young Mister Exeter blind, and you a-lying here like this — what is it, sir? They told me you were the proper one to explain."

"Johnson," I said, grinning, "that's the first time I ever heard your voice express anything but well-bred deference."

JOHNSON coughed and, I imagine, looked at the floor with embarrassment. "Very strange circumstances, sir," he said.

"I shan't keep you in suspense, Johnson, although these callous people have. Are you prepared to hear a nightmare of a yarn?"

"Are you prepared to tell it?" growled John Baringer.

"Oh, yes. I seem to have had a good bit of rest lately." I drank from a glass that Marion put to my mouth, and said, "You remember Jerry Wolfe?"

"Of course, sir."

"You were there the day he came back to the Gloucester Club and was murdered, weren't you?" I knew he had been, but I was feeling my way into the story.

"Yes, sir. I brought him and Mister Talbot here a bottle of Scotch. I saw him killed."

"He told Alec—" Alec Talbot was the chap with one arm: he'd left the other in Europe somewhere, during the latter days of the war—"he told Alec a tale that day, Johnson. It's a wild, incredible, super-fantastic tale. No sane man would believe a word of it."

"No, sir."

"But we six believe it, Johnson."

"Yes, sir. I gather it has something to do with this—"

"This madness of ours. It does. You see, Jerry Wolfe was nearly blinded in India when a Tower musket was discharged athwart his eyes. The bandages were removed as he was coming home, and he found he could see . . . could see rather more than most of us can."

"Yes, sir," said the dignified voice. "May I ask what he could see, sir?"

"He could see into Hell," said Alec Talbot quietly.

"HE could see that certain people are not — people," I went on. "Let me try to explain that. He discovered that there are among us many aliens of another race, perhaps from another dimension, or from another planet, or — who knows? He thought they were out of a different dimension, because he could see silvery lines behind them which he believed to be that dimension's scenery, as it were. Each of these aliens, these usurpers, as he called them, had stolen a human body, and was using it as a focal point of entrance into our world. Do you follow me?"

"With some difficulty, sir."

"Drop the 'sir', Johnson. We're all plain human beings together in this."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, he could see these alien creatures, but within them, or behind

them, he could also see the human bodies they were occupying: the bodies which to everyone else appeared to be quite normal men and women. The bodies apparently didn't contain a human soul or mind or whatever you want to call it, but were only puppets for the interlopers. He sat in Charing Cross Station and made notes on them, at one stage of his adventures, and he decided that they were entering this world by usurping the bodies of newly-born children, children of unions between two of them or between one of them and a regular human. See?"

"Vaguely, sir."

"He figured out that after a few of them got into our dimension, through some fluke or other, they found that they could spawn puppet-humans who would become vehicles for others of their breed. They come 'in' by route of birth. Perhaps, Jerry thought, a freak accident generations ago let just one of them into our world, and he put his foot in the door. Now there are multitudes of them here. What was the ratio Jerry calculated, Alec?"

"About seven to six in our favor," said Alec Talbot. "Of course, that was figured within an hour or so at Charing Cross Station. He didn't have a chance to make a real survey. They got him first."

"Yes, they got him. He was so shocked by his discovery that he didn't cover up fast enough, and they found out he could see them. They harried him all over half of

England, and finally they tracked him down at the club and shot his guts out."

"He died in my arms," said Alec without expression.

"But Mister Wolfe was shot by men from Scotland Yard and bobbies, sir," protested Johnson.

"That's what they seemed to be, Johnson, to you, Jerry could see them truly. He knew they were the usurpers, using the husks of human beings as points of contact between our dimension and theirs."

JOHNSON coughed politely. "And this is the story he told Mister Talbot?"

"It is."

"And you all believe it?"

"We do. Partly because it tallies up with a lot of queer things, partly because it explains a lot of others. But mainly because we all knew Jerry Wolfe, and he was as sane and decent a fellow as ever breathed tobacco smoke."

"Yes, sir."

"He couldn't see all of their dimension, you understand. It was only where one of them had taken over a human body that the veil was thin enough to be pierced by his blast-warped sight. There was a sort of field of force or something around them, and he could see the beasts and their nearby background of silver lines that ran at an angle of about forty-five degrees. That was all. He killed the human parts of three or four of them, and al-

though he couldn't touch the other-dimensional folk with his bullets, when their human puppets died they were relegated to their own world again. They faded out and vanished, he said. Their point of contact was obliterated."

"I see, sir. I begin to get the picture. These foreigners—" I could not help smiling at the word—"have been infiltrating our island by some means, using our bodies, you might say, as disguises. A dirty bit of business, sir, if I may say so."

"Very dirty, Johnson. Because if nothing is done to stop them, eventually they'll have our whole world to themselves."

Johnson evidently thought this over for a moment. I could hear everyone breathing heavily in the silence. Then, "What do they want with it, sir?" he asked.

"Lord knows. Jerry never asked 'em."

"Ah. It gives one pause, sir."

"It damned well does. It's given us so much pause—the six of us—that we've decided to devote our lives to fighting the usurpers. That's why we're doing this huggermugger business, Johnson. We're duplicating Jerry Wolfe's experience, trying to get our eyesight warped or marred or shifted, or whatever the phrase ought to be, as his was. So we can see 'em, and combat 'em, and send 'em home to their silver-lined wastelands."

"And that's what happened—"

"To Geoff Exeter. Yes. We did

the same thing with him that you saw two nights ago with me in the chair. Unfortunately — there's a feeble word! — we bungled somehow. And Geoff is blind."

"YOU get used to it," said Geoff Exeter cheerfully. "It's in a good cause. Better cause than we fought the Nazis for if Jerry Wolfe was right."

"We're banking that he was, We're betting our eyes or our lives, Johnson, that he was right."

"If you'll forgive me, sir, it seems a terribly long chance to take. He might have been addled in the head, or drunk; or if he was right, you may all lose your eyes and never acquire his strange vision."

"We're relying on old Jerry," said Alec Talbot. "You see, at least three of us were at loose ends, with nothing to make of our lives, and our hearts full of bitterness and frustration. It's given us an aim in life. It's given us life itself, by heaven! We drew lots, Geoff and Will and I; Geoff got first try, Will the second, and I lost. I'm to be the third one. Before he was murdered, Jerry told me who was all right and who wasn't. He'd seen a few chaps he knew — Will and Geoff and the doctor here, Marion and Colonel Bedford. He bequeathed me their names. I rounded them up and beat them with Jerry's yarn until they began to feel a horrid truth in it. Then just a few days ago I remembered that you'd been our

waiter at the Club that night, and he'd sat easy and safe in your presence; so we knew you were human too."

"I'm sure I'm very gratified, sir. But what can I do?"

"We don't know. We don't know what any of us can do. But we were only six. Johnson — six against half a world. We grasped at you like a drowning man at a —"

"Straw," said Marion. "Really, Alec, your similes stun me!"

"I was going to say 'bottle of whisky'," growled Alec.

"Do you get the whole picture now, Johnson?" I asked.

"I think so, sir. Just one thing . . ."

"What's that?"

"Well, sir, what do these aliens look like? I mean, if you can see them?"

"Like obscene nightmares," I said. "Like demons down under the sea. Like anything and everything you can conjure up that's evil and strange and full of hellishness."

"Oh. Quite so, sir," said Johnson woodenly.

"Jerry talked of toads, of sharks and dragons, weird tree-shapes and amoebae, but he made it clear that those were only far-fetched similes." Alec's voice was low; he was remembering his friend, haggard and gray in the face, a ghastly ghost of the man he had once been. I broke in.

"Yes, Johnson, they're a fearful horde. If Jerry was right, they're

overrunning us in a manner far more subtle and deadly than any invader ever did before. Which is why we must take these desperate measures. Are you with us?"

"Of course, sir," said the old waiter.

"Why?" asked the skeptical Doctor Baringer. "Why so quick to leap at this fantastic story, Johnson? I've got into the affair over my head, but I'm still not sure I believe in it."

"Well, sir, you might say I'm in just about the same position as Mister Exeter and Mister Talbot and Mister Chester. I'm an old soldier, much too old to be of any use in a regular war any longer; and I still fret for the days of bivouac and battle. If you'll pardon the liberty, sir, I must agree with you that it's a rum go, a very rum go. But if it's true, then I may be of some slight use in the world after all."

"You were a soldier, Johnson?" I asked.

"Sergeant, Boer War, sir. I fought at the siege of Ladysmith and a dozen other engagements."

"I thought the Boer War was a million years ago," said Marion Black.

"Very nearly, miss," said Johnson with a dry chuckle.

"Welcome to the ranks, Sergeant Johnson," said Alec Talbot.

I started to say something, but suddenly was very weary; so instead I went to sleep.

CHAPTER III

TEN days later they took off the bandages. The doctor had changed them and examined my eyes a number of times, but always in what was to me total darkness; I believe he used some sort of queer light, infra-red or black or what-have-you. I'm not up on these medical and scientific gadgets.

The last layer of gauze came off. Nothing happened. The world to me was all a pinkish-red blurring.

"I can't see," I said. "John! I can't see!"

"Neither can I when my eyes are closed," said Marion, with a nervous choked laugh.

So I opened my eyes.

I saw a tall straight old man, a one-armed chap, a young fellow in dark glasses, a rather stuffy-looking retired colonel, a middle-aged physician with a worried face, and a girl as radiant as a spring morning.

"Greetings," I said unsteadily. "Greetings, little army. Don't look so scared."

Alec Talbot grinned and Marion gulped with relief, Colonel Bedford clapped me hard on the shoulder, muttering something that was probably "Stout fella!" Geoff Exter said, "You can see, Will? Your eyes are all right?"

"I think so. Yes, there isn't anything but a little fuzziness around the edges."

"That may be the result of the long spell of darkness," said John

Baringer, fussing about professionally.

"Well, let's get out and test the old orbs," said I, throwing off the covers. John pushed me back into the pillow.

"Not for a day or two. You've got to regain your strength. Been in bed a long time."

I raged, but it did no good. It was three mornings later when at last I was allowed to leave the old castle — it belonged to Geoff Exter's family, by the way, Geoff's father being old Lord Joseph Exter — and go into town, with Colonel Bedford at the wheel of my Jaguar.

We averaged a wild and impetuous thirty-two miles per hour all the way there. The Colonel was a driver of the old, the very old, school, and obviously wished that the sleek little sports car were a two-wheeled tanga. As for me, I fidgeted and mumbled and longed to get behind the wheel myself. I had once clocked the two-seater at a hundred and fourteen m.p.h., and when she was forced to creep along like this, both she and I were unhappy. However, my job was to observe, and so I contained my impatience perforce.

WE circled the village and came in from the opposite end. No one knew we were staying at the long-deserted Exter Castle, and we meant to keep it that way. It was a priceless hideaway, an excellent G.H.Q. for our planned insur-

gence.

The village of Exeter Parva contained some three hundred souls, if one included eighteen large placid-faced farm horses and ninety-seven dogs more or less. It was market day. The countryside had boiled in-to town for a hectic time. You might have scraped more citizens out of the pubs of one short London lane, and heard more noise in Westminster Abbey; but for Exeter Parva it was a gala morning.

We drove down the main street—I believe it was the *only* street, but this may be prejudice on my part—and stopped to let a couple of deeply suspicious cows pass by on either side. "Well?" asked the Colonel.

I had nearly forgotten the purpose of the jaunt. I narrowed my eyes and stared keenly about me. I saw farmers in dull blue and faded gray, women in carefully mended finery, children in everything from Sunday bests to Saturday rags. I saw what one might see in any small village on market day. I saw no monsters whatever. I sighed and gave a weak grin. "Just people," I told him. "Just Englishmen."

He attempted to gnaw his short mustache. "Which means either that *they* don't foregather in small towns, or that *they* existed only in Captain Wolfe's brain," said he meditatively. "Which, mind you, young fella, I don't believe for a minute. If there was ever a sane 'un, Wolfe was he. Besides, he'd served in my old stations in India."

He pronounced it "Injuh." He edged the Jaguar forward through what Exeter Parva doubtless considered its heavy traffic. "Or else the experiment didn't work. When you think about it, that's the logical explanation. Whatever happened to the Captain's eyes must have been almighty complicated. Don't understand a tenth of it myself, these dimensions and whatnot, but there it is. Frightfully complex changes must ha' been wrought."

I was too dispirited to answer that. "Let's have a drink," I said. "There's a tavern. At least we can have a mug of ale before we go back."

"Right." He parked the Jaguar expertly if rather slowly. We went into the tavern, which was called The Leathern Funnel.

"Well, gents, what'll it be?" inquired the barmaid affably.

"Two ales, miss, if you please," said the Colonel. It was lucky for me that he ordered. I could not have produced anything but a squeak or a howl. The mugs bumped down before us and I picked mine up with both hands and drank it off like a thirst-mad sot after a month of bread-and-water. Then I aimed myself carefully at the door and put on the greatest piece of acting of my career. I walked casually and without a single stumble all the way to the street. The Colonel came after me.

"What the deuce, Chester! You

don't allow a chap much time to enjoy his bit of ale," he grumbled.

I got in at the off side of the Jaguar without speaking and put my hands on the wheel. "Ready?" I managed to ask.

"Here, I'm to drive."

"You are like hell. Get in." He did. "Hang on." I nudged the old girl out of the village and when we were hidden by the first hill I trod on her pedals with all my weight and terror behind my feet. We crashed off into a beautiful eighty m.p.h., which I held or surpassed all the way home. Three or four times he tried to hellow something at me. I ignored him.

When we had flown up the long winding drive I put her into the stables, part of which we had fitted up as a garage. Then I sat there in the gloom and shook with what felt like fever.

"Here, what is it, laddie?" he barked. "What's wrong?"

"Describe the barmaid," I said.

"What?"

"Describe the barmaid."

"Fortyish, plain, thickset, red hands, red face, couple of warts. Pleasant expression. Right?"

"Not exactly. You left out a few things."

"What on earth?"

"The green horns, six of 'em, growing out of her face in the middle where the nose should have been. The shifting outlines that looked now like a tree stump and now like an octopus. The pulsing heart of

scarlet fire in the belly. The dusky-pink tentacles that pushed the mugs across the bar. The pure hatred that throbbed visibly and seemed to feel cold when it got near you. The eyes like bursting orchids full of slimy white worms."

He put his hand on my arm and tightened his grip until his knuckles grew pale. "Merciful God!" he said quietly. "Merciful God!"

CHAPTER IV

WE went into the deserted hall of Exeter Castle. "Look, Colonel," I said, "will you tell them about this? They'll be upstairs. Tell 'em that it works, that I can see as Jerry Wolfe saw, and everything he told Alec was true. I'll be all right after a while, but now I want to be alone. I don't want to be hedged in by close walls, or have to talk. I'll just roam around down here for a bit. You tell 'em it's okay, that I'll speak to them later."

"Absolutely." The Colonel was the best stuff there is. "Come up when you feel like it, son." He was gone.

I strolled over to one of the great mullioned windows and touched its dusty glass lightly. That glass was older, probably, than all our little hand put together. I thought: when it was placed here, were the usurping devils abroad in England? How long have they been filtering through into our world—a hundred years, a thousand? If you start with one

and he lets in others, then figuring by the birth rate and the multiplying branches of his horrid clan, how long would it take to let in a million of them? How many figures of our glorious history were just that — figures, puppets, marionettes pulled by fourth-dimensional strings, flesh-and-bone shadows fronting for demons . . .

We are no other than a moving row of magic shadow-shapes that come and go . . .

Jerry had asserted that when the human body died, the alien was relegated to his own world again. Then it had to come back, I presumed, via another birth. It must be centuries, then, at the very least a couple of centuries, since the first one came through. It takes time to corrupt the blood of six-thirteenths of all England.

But was it six-thirteenths? Jerry had taken his census in Charing Cross Station. At Exeter Parva I had seen exactly one usurper. Were they then centered in London? Were there perhaps no more than fifteen or twenty thousand of them altogether? That brought down the odds!

I laughed loudly, and the age-old echoes waked in the oak rafters and laughed after me. Oh, the odds were in my favor, all right.

Opposing me, say (conservatively) twenty thousand foemen: great livid beasts like nothing a sane mind could conceive, that had a system of

communication outside my dimension which could gather a score or a thousand of them to down me if I showed flight.

On my side, a regular Colonel Blimp of a retired officer, a Boer War veteran, a skeptical middle-aged physician, a blind man, another chap with no left arm, and a girl.

And I: Will Chester, thirty-three years old, five feet ten, moderately strong, normally intelligent; having all my teeth save two, a thick crop of black hair, brown eyes, a complexion more ruddy than otherwise, and a face that, if it would not halt a charging bull in his tracks, still would not win a beauty competition either . . . Seven years of Army behind me, an income of eight hundred pounds a year from a legacy, and nothing much in view as a future, until this morning — when I had suddenly been elected the savior of mankind.

I walked across to the tremendous blackened fireplace, empty now of everything but a lonely-looking single bronze firedog. Above the key-stone of the arch were the arms and motto of the Exeters, done in ancient stonework. I could not read the motto, having forgotten what Latin I once knew. The arms were a jumble of crossed lances, fleurs-de-lis, and hounds couchant. I wished I had a hound to fondle and pat, to be a companion in these moments when I felt I could not bear a human being near me.

FOR half an hour or so I stood there gazing blindly into the depths of the hearth and pitying myself shamelessly. Then a touch on my arm made me leap like a deer. It was Marion; Marion, carrying with her her own special radiance even in the shadowed hall.

"What cheer, old stager?" she said.

"Not much cheer, lady."

"Obviously. What is it, got the wind up? Scared sky-blue-pink?"

"Yes. I've just realized that this whole affair is fact, is true; that it's not a crazy adventure in fancy, but a dreadfully real matter of saving the same world from destruction — and I'm scared!"

"We all are." She said it quietly, and with her simple words I knew for the first time that I was not alone in my terror of the unknown. We were all afraid. I put my arm around her shoulders. Her long light hair tingled on the back of my hand. I loved her very much, and so I tormented myself.

"I've been thinking of Jerry Wolfe, and of how alone he must have felt. He didn't have six pals behind him when the first alien fouled his view."

"Poor old Jerry," she said.

"You were engaged to him, weren't you?"

"Yes, back in prehistoric times, before Jennifer Tregennis caught him. Jennifer was one of *them*, you know."

"Yes, I know. D'you still love Jerry?"

"How do you mean? Of course I do."

I didn't say anything. She went on after a moment. "But I'm not in love with him, if that's what you're driving at. Good heavens, Will, do you see me as a moony widow-in-name-only? I've got more sense than that."

My heart lifted. I patted her on the back. "Come along young Marion. Let's go plan strategy with the troops."

We went up the stairs to our sitting room, and I stood before the six of them and took the reins into my hands. I had a job to do.

CHAPTER V

"IT comes to this, then," said Alec. "You mean to go and mingle with the enemy, and try to discover weak spots in 'em, eh?"

"I don't see any other way to begin. We've been scratching for a plan ever since we first heard of the usurpers; and nobody's come up with one, for the good reason that we have nothing to go on. Oh, granted we know we can kill their worldly bodies and send them home. But I hardly think we're going to do nothing but roam the countryside killing off puppets for the next thirty years."

"Remember what Jerry told me — that once one of them was sent back to his own dimension, he could evidently still communicate with those who were left here? That the aliens

who're attached to human bodies exist in both dimensions equally?"

"Yes, Alec, I was thinking of that a few minutes ago. It means that under no circumstances can I let any one of them discover I can see them; for even if I killed him here, he could go around his silver-lined dimension telling all his pals about me. It means working in the dark, from behind, anonymously. It means I've got to be circumspect as Satan. We all have to be circumspect."

"Beg pardon, sir," put in Johnson, "but when do the rest of us have a try at warping our eyeballs?"

"You don't, Sergeant," I said flatly.

"What d'you mean, we don't?" cried Alec. "Of course we do."

"No, son, not for a while, anyhow. It's a hundred to one, or a million, more likely, to one, that we couldn't duplicate the exact injuries again. We can't blind anyone else now. One of us seeing them may be enough — or if he isn't, then half a dozen might not be any better."

"I think Will's right," said Marion suddenly. She lit a cigarette while we waited. "I think we mustn't press our luck too far. At least we should wait until we have a plan. I think — I really think one will be enough."

"Why?"

"Those million to one odds. Why did the experiment succeed the second time? I think God's with us. I think God's on our side, and means us to win."

We were all very quiet for a while.

I went over to a wall mirror and examined my face. I took out my little tin of pancake makeup, Marion's clever idea, and spread some thinly on the scars of the blast: the little pink almost-healed scars that ran across the bridge of my nose and scattered out fanwise toward my ears. We were dealing with cleverness beyond thought, and every tiny giveaway must be taken care of.

"Jerry Wolfe died," I said, still peering in the mirror, "because he was taken unawares, because he hadn't prepared himself to stay incognito among them. I have. I've had my first sight of *them*, and been terribly shocked, yes; but now I think I'll be all right. I'm ready to go."

"Up to London?"

"Yes."

"We'll all go."

"In a bunch? I don't think."

"No, in pairs and trios. But there's no sense in any of us frettin' here without news from you." The Colonel was firm. "The motors are below. Ready, you chaps?"

"Packed and primed," said Geoff.

"Let's be off."

And almost before I knew it we were in the old stables, putting our gear in the back of Alec's great red Rolls.

"Who'll ride with me?" I asked.

"Not I," barked the Colonel promptly. "I've had some of your idea of driving."

"I'll go with you, Will," said Geoff Exeter. "Just put my fist on the car, will you?" I did so, and he

climbed in. "I like speed," he said.

I had been hoping for Marion's company, but Geoff — well, he rated a front-row stall in the game. He'd lost his eyes for us. I said, "Geoff will stick with me for the first days. The rest of you put up at the Albany, where Colonel Bedford has a suite, and at that inn in Baker Street, The Gray Gander. Geoff and I will be at the Gloucester Club."

"I shall be there too, sir," said Johnson. "I've been on 'sick leave' quite long enough."

"Roger. Geoff, the Sergeant and I at the Gloucester. The Colonel and John at the Albany. Marion and Alec at The Gray Gander. Don't get in touch with me, unless you give birth to some really ripping idea. I'll find you when there's news."

I touched Marion's hand in farewell, and slid into the Jaguar. We backed out and shot away into the blue.

CHAPTER VI

WE stood at the bar of a dingy little pub on the outskirts of the dingy little district of Seven Dials. Geoff, who was learning to orient himself by sounds, heard the clunk of his mug on the bar, and unerringly put his fingers around it. "Pretty good, eh?" he asked me, sipping the half-and-half.

"You'll be a wizard at it in a few months."

"I meant the ruddy ale, idiot. I'm not bragging about my accom-

plishments yet. Seen any of our chums lately?" he asked.

"Oh, dozens. Run into 'em everywhere." It was a kind of simple code; I was telling him that the pub was full of the aliens.

"Fine. Any of 'em give you any news? Anything startling been happening?"

"Not much. Same old stuff."

Same old stuff!

Same old fiends from Abaddon! Same old hosts of Hell! Same old ogres and ghouls, harpies and bugaboos, hobgoblins and bellhags!

The barman, when I squinted, was a big jovial red-nosed Cockney. The barman, when I opened my eyes normally, was a writhing monster, a shapeless blob of intangible protoplasm in whose depths moved turgid lights of orange and mauve; from whose devilish form the waves of malevolence came and went like the roiled swell made by the sluggish moving of some hideous primeval entity beneath the surface of a grisly tarn . . .

I grinned at him. "Cool weather for June, mate," said I affably.

"Ar, yus," he agreed.

I was pleased with myself. Like a spy plunked down in a strange land, I had been feeling my way to confidence these last days, growing used to the shapes about me, learning to show an expression of bland normality when confronted with unnameable horrors. I believed I was perfectly ready now to begin our war.

The only trouble was that I hadn't the faintest idea of *how* to begin it!

ONE could move among these usurpers for a lifetime, I thought, and learn nothing about them except that they were more hideous than leprous two-headed baboons, more incomprehensible than might be the dwellers of Mars. I watched them talking among themselves where they sat at the little oak tables. While their earthly husks chatted of prosaic things, the forms around the husks spoke — inaudibly to me — with twisting tentacles, gesturing pseudopods, flowers of rotten-looking "flesh" that grew upon their bodies and swelled and burst and subsided to nothingness again. I knew they were speaking of terrible things . . .

"Let's go," I said to Geoff. "Time we were thinking of bed."

"Righto."

I gave the barman good-night in a pleasant voice, and we emerged from that ninth circle of Hell into the cool and lovely air. Seven Diabls lay about us, all a-murmur with the homely human sounds of earth's evening. I could not stand it.

"Geoff," I whispered, "I'm going to start the ball rolling. I'm going to find out something."

"How, old son?"

"I'm going to do a murder."

"Think it's wise?" he asked.

"I want to ascertain something. Just come along a bit."

We went up a dingy street and turned down a lane or two, until at last we were alone on a length of grubby pavement, shadowed by the rickety houses on either side. "Stand here," I said to Geoff Exeter. "It's black in this corner and you won't be noticed. I'll come for you in half a tick."

He saluted carelessly. What nerve he had! To stand alone, blind and helpless, ignorant of what I meant to do — I think Geoff was the bravest of all our little band.

I slunk up the street to a place some forty yards off, and hid myself in a time-battered doorway. The street lay empty and deserted in the early moonlight. I drew the great keen knife that lived on the side of my belt these days, and I waited.

A man came down the road, staggering drunkenly. He was a man. I let him pass.

Another came toward me. I heard his footsteps in the dark, echoing valley of brick, and shortly thereafter saw him pass beneath a fading street lamp.

Do you remember the passage in Doyle's *Last World*, where the hero is pursued along a jungle trail by a prehistoric carnivore?

"This beast had a broad, squat, toad-like face . . . the moonlight shone upon his huge projecting eyes, the row of enormous teeth in his open mouth, and the gleaming fringe of claws upon his short, powerful

jeorcarms. With a scream of terror I turned and rushed wildly down the path."

Well, I did not turn and rush wildly down the street, but if I had not been hardened by much contact with the aliens, I think I must have done so. This was the worst I had seen: toad-like, yes, but squat and loathsome as no toad ever hoped to be; and indeed some of the projections of its form did look like claws and fangs. Yet no prehistoric reptile could ever have exuded the repulsive effluvia of evil which radiated from this hideous usurper.

As it passed me I felt my stomach draw in as if from a sharp blow, and it is a wonder to me to this day that I did not scream or become violently ill. The gods were with me, however, and I kept strict silence.

WHEN it had gone on a dozen paces, I slipped out and followed it noiselessly. Moving as I had moved on many a commando raid in the old days, I eased up behind it. It did not turn — neither of its bodies turned. Narrowing my eyes, I lifted the great knife and struck, with all the hatred in my soul concentrated in the blow. The blade sank into the pseudo-human neck, severing the spinal cord instantly, and before my horrified eyes the great toad-creature swelled, turned vivid crimson, and went out like the flame of a trodden candle.

It had left our dimension in the

very instant that its human bulk had died.

Sheathing the knife under my coat, I flew down to where Geoff stood patiently waiting. I took his arm.

"Come on, boy, let's make tracks."

"Home?"

"No, to another pub." We hurried down an alley, turned up a street and down another, until I had put a maze of lanes behind us. Then we slowed abruptly and ambled into a smoky little room full of liquor fumes.

"Two beers, old toff," I said to the fright behind the bar.

We guzzled them slowly, while I watched the aliens around the tables and at the bar. Shortly there was a flurry of excitement among them, the tentacles writhing quickly and the ghastly brutes enlarging and deflating as though pumped by a bellows. All the time the human portions drank and chatted and played darts. But the usurpers were excited over something. Shortly half a dozen of them moved toward the door, the people in no evident hurry, but their marionette-masters wriggling like mad, as though eaten with impatience.

I knew they were going to discuss something important. I had what I had come for.

"Bedtime," I said to Geoff Exeter. We went out of the pub and caught a tram for the vicinity of the Gloucester Club.

CHAPTER VII

SAFE in our rooms, with Johnson sitting, very unlike a waiter, behind a bottle of brandy and a tray of sandwiches, and Geoff lying on the Chesterfield smoking a pipe he could not taste, I told them what I had done.

"It's taught me a couple of things I didn't know, and affirmed some others I wasn't sure of. First, I'm certain the faculties of these brutes are the same in this dimension as their human parts'. That toad didn't hear me coming, I know. He didn't have time to turn and get a look at me before he went *pop* and left us. He was bound to the body till I released him, I think, and if he'd left it he couldn't have got back into it, or rather around it. His ears weren't keener than a man's, or he'd have turned to see me when I crept up behind him.

"But their communication system is terrific. That's where they have it all over us. When he was shut out of our world, the toad must have gone around their region telling his pals about it; and before long the ones who were in that pub heard of it, too. Now they weren't told by a newcomer, for I watched the door; so they were told on *their* side of the veil, by an alien who wasn't occupying a human frame. Got it thus far?"

"I admit to a little uncertainty here and there, sir."

"Well, put it like this. There's

a long tall screen set up across a stage. On one side of the screen—our side—are a lot of human beings. This side is our world as we know it. On the other side, the fourth dimension or whatever it may be, are a lot of these horrid-lookin' beasts of usurpers.

"Now here and there in the screen are holes, and through them some of the aliens are holding fake human beings, just as in our well-worn simile of the puppet show. I can see those who are leaning through the holes, but you can't.

"When they're leaning through, they haven't any powers except those of normal people. They can't hear any better than a man. They can't walk through bricks or see through stones. They can't look behind them without turning the human puppet around. I've been watching them and I feel pretty certain of that. In some curious way they're limited by their puppets' limitations here. That makes it easier to assassinate 'em, by the way — I just have to make sure that the human form doesn't get a chance to turn its head and spot me before it dies."

I drank a little brandy and went on intently. "The only way they really have me beat six ways from the jack is in their system of tidings, of spreading 'em, I mean. That's a marvel. For as soon as I shoot or stab or throttle a puppet, the beast that's been twiddlin' his strings leaves him and goes along behind

that hypothetical screen between the worlds, telling all his playmates about it; and if he's had a chance to see me, and can describe me, then about a thousand of the others will be watching through their holes in the screen for a blighter of my specifications, and my name is Lord Jonathan Mud."

"I see," nodded Johnson.

"So my problem is to remain utterly anonymous. And I needn't tell you that if I try to embark on a career of murder-by-night, I won't last very long."

"No, you won't." Geoff was grave. "What else is there to do, though?"

"I don't know. And I think I could watch them for a lifetime and not learn another thing about 'em. I'm a tremendously handicapped spy because I can't disguise myself as one of them, and I can't understand what they say to each other. It's like a man going into a colony of bears and trying to pass himself off as a bear, except that I can't even begin to look like a usurper, while I *could* put on a grizzly skin."

"What are we to do, sir?" asked Johnson. His pale face was deadly serious. "We must do something, sir—but only you can decide what it's to be."

Two weeks before, I might have groaned aloud at such a responsibility. Now I took it in stride. Any one who had been observing the demons of Hell at their work for fourteen days and nights had either to take things as they came along

or to go stark staring loony.

"I'll tell you what we'll do first. I'll take Geoff over to the Albany. Then I'll strike out alone for a bit. Maybe for a week, maybe a month. Travel light, fast, and inquisitive. Give myself a chance to cook up plots. And if nothing's come of it by then, why, I suppose we'll just have to set up an assassination bureau and hope I live a hundred years . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

AND so for a time I dwelt alone among the beast-folk.

Packing a few shirts and such in a Gladstone bag, I left London in the black Jaguar, ostensibly on a casual motoring jaunt. I headed up through the East Anglian Heights, stopping the first night in the lovely town of Bury St. Edmunds. Strolling through the streets next morning, I was astonished and heartened beyond measure to find not a single usurper abroad. I went into a pub—I had begun to think that the aliens were concentrated in pubs, so many horrendous bartenders had I seen—and bought a pint from a perfectly normal girl. Lingerling about the town, I passed the time of day with gardeners and workmen and loafers, and was tempted to throw up the game and stay here in this oasis of normality forever; but after lunch forced myself to get into the Jaguar and roar off into the Lincoln Heights, where I spent a jolly evening in Old

Bolingbroke talking politics with a spidery yellow creature who amused himself by flicking my face now and again with his hairy-looking, tenuous, unfelt members. When at last I went to bed I felt that I had served my apprenticeship and was a full-fledged spy who could thenceforth bear anything the enemy could show or do . . .

I worked westward and put up for a week at Manchester, in which great inland port I found an awful concentration of *them*. I left the two-seater at a garage and walked the streets from dawn till midnight, observing, thinking furiously, trying to construct impossible plans of attack.

The third night, making sure that my knife was safely sheathed under my coat, I went into the slums to do murder.

Deliberately I chose my victim: a strapping brute of a navvy whose mortal form was surrounded by a cloudy gray beast of indescribable grossness. I shadowed him from tavern to tavern, finally catching him alone in a narrow gut of an alley where the light fell dismally on scummed pools of stagnant water and heaps of filth. I crept up behind him and circling his neck with my left arm I held him motionless for dragging seconds, my knee in the small of his back. He struggled madly, but could not turn his head: and although the gray fiend puffed up and hurled out its streamers of ugly mist-like stuff, I knew it was

helpless to see me without twisting the human neck around. That was what I had wanted to know for certain, what I had staked the continuance of my crusade on. I tipped up the navvy's chin and sliced across his throat with the clean steel. He died, gurgling, and the monster dwindled away into gray ribbons and vanished.

NOW I felt I had verified my earlier theory of the limitation of their senses on this plane. Not only did the outsider have to rely for hearing on the ears of his manikin, for tactile sensations on the nerves of the were-human, for strength on his muscles and (for all I knew) for taste and scent on the poor dumb thing's tongue and nose—but most important of all, I believed that the beast must see into this world through the puppet's eyes, and through them alone! The recent gray devil had been able to twist and turn itself to some degree independently of its fleshly body; what I took to be its eyes, a cluster of violet-tinted globules high in its upper torso, had flashed all round as it moved, even seeming to flit over me once or twice; yet it obviously could not detect me with them, or surely it would have concentrated their baleful focus on my face.

No, I was certain that I could only be seen by the eyes in the heads of the puppets. I may as well say now that I never had cause to change this conception of mine,

and still strongly believe it to be true.

This may be as good a place as any to make it plain that my descriptions of the beast-folk are of necessity limited and analogical; but that the beings themselves had no analogy in anything existing on this prosaic three-dimensional globe. This is true in part because of their utterly undefinable proportions and lineations, which had to be seen to be fathomed, and in part because the creatures did, after all, exist in at least one more dimension than our acknowledged three, so that, despite my own mutant vision, I saw them in a state of flux, continuously moving, warping, and seeming to bend at impossible angles and to flow off just beyond the range of my sight into a sphere which was to me forever invisible.

It must be understood, too, that when I identify portions of them as beaks, mouths, orifices, eyes on stalks, and other natural parts of animal life, I am only grasping at the nearest comparison. For all I know, their senses may reside in quite different organs than eyes, mouths, noses and so on. For all I know, indeed, they may have no actual five senses in our meaning of the term. They seemed to communicate, it's true, by a kind of writhing and wriggling motion, which may have been accompanied by sounds which I could not hear; but this may have been akin to a nervous reaction, while their actual talk might

well have been telepathic.

DURING the next two nights I gave rein to my intense abhorrence of these invaders from another world, and stalked through the city slaying indiscriminately in a passion of hatred. This makes me sound as bloodthirsty as a weasel. Well, I was. A tiny human David opposing a hideous throng of Goliaths, I gave no quarter even as they had given none to my friend Jerry Wolfe.

Of course the police, the newspapers, the citizens of Manchester were shaken by the wave of inexplicable violence. Headlines shrieked that a new Ripper was abroad. And at that I began to wonder: what if an accident had happened to somebody's eyes back in the 1880s, and he, seeing the aliens all about him, had begun on a wild career of assassination like my own? What if he had prowled the slums as I was doing, killing and mutilating in a frenzy of detestation? Was that the true explanation of the never-identified Jack The Ripper? Was he, perhaps, a much-maligned champion of mankind? It was at least a fascinating possibility!

For those few score of hours I felt no remorse, no distaste for my butcher's job, no sorrow except a fleeting one for the human relatives and friends of these poor brainless husks I was destroying. And their grief, I was persuaded, was as nothing in the balance against the good I was actually doing them by ridding

our plane of the invading beast-folk.

Then reaction set in, and I lay in my hotel room and shook as though I had blackwater.

I couldn't keep this up, week after week, month after month, for years — even if I were not discovered, either by our police or by *them*, I knew I could not go on. Give me what resounding titles you wish: savior of mankind, champion of humanity, valiant worker for the survival of the race — I was still only a kind of butcher. I knew I was glutted with killing. The papers put my total score at nineteen corpses. They were husks, puppets, yes: but even though what I killed had no life save that imparted by the guiding usurper, it still had the flesh and the blood of my own breed. When the alien was dispatched to his own place, what remained had the look and feel and smell of someone who might have been my brother. I had once quite callously shot a number of tigers in India; but when a tiger dies, he does not turn into the slashed corpse of a man. He remains a tiger. If only the usurpers had continued in their own true shapes after the slayings. I think I might have gone on killing them forever.

So again I moved harmlessly among my foemen, and watched them colloque together in their silent, loathsome fashion, and did nothing.

And a great melancholy took me; and I felt as helpless as a child

surrounded by the dismal wraiths of all ghost-haunted England, as hopeless as a man alone in a jungle full of teeming ghouls.

I would have given a year of my life for one hour with Marion Black, but I would not write or telephone her to come to me. I didn't want *them* to be able to connect me with any of my band, in case *they* ever discovered my identity.

Then, on the last night I spent in Manchester, I got a little drunk (out of frustration and despondency, and my inarticulate, stupidly silent love for Marion) and I decided to put just one more of the enemy out of the fight, before I went on my way.

CHAPTER IX

IT was a mean street, one of the meanest in the whole city. The moon was vivid, and straight overhead, so that my shadow lay in a black little pool around my feet. I sought a dark doorway and waited, knife in hand, my brain full of liquor and loathing.

A man, and a man, and then a beast . . .

I slid along in his tracks, glancing quickly behind me to make sure we were unobserved, and swiftly performed the now-familiar operation of driving the impalpable demon back to its own dimension by hacking the throat of the man-shape. Standing above the dead thing, I knew for a second or two the feeling that must

have held Jack The Ripper as he stood over his victims; I wanted to stab and slash and mutilate, I wanted to let out some of the terrible hatred that boiled in my heart.

Civilization won, however, and I sheathed the knife after wiping it clean on the man's leather jacket.

At that moment one of *them* came round the corner and stood staring at me, not twenty feet off!

It was a gorgon of a brute, with several repulsive "heads" on lean stalks of necks; the biggest one looked rather like a hippopotamus whose mother had been frightened by a Ubangi, and I was so used to the weird beings by now that, had I seen this one on a daylight street, I think I would have chuckled. In that deserted lane, though, with the shell of its brother's puppet at my feet, I didn't chuckle. I turned and ran like hell.

A whistle split the air; I turned my head as I pelted away, and squinted my eyes. By all the gods! The hippo gorgon was a bobbie! A ruddy P.C.!

The garage where my Jaguar champed at her inactive gears was only a couple of blocks from the lane. I made for it, taking an extra turning or two in order to lose my pursuer. Coming to the big double doors, I slowed to a business-like stride, went in and demanded my car with a brisk tone, and bestowed a couple of notes on the attendant who brought her to me.

"Be coming back again?" he ask-

ed me cheerily.

"Oh, very likely," I lied, and because he was a blessedly human little man, I tipped him an extra pound, which made him goggle and stutter as he thanked me.

I shot the black car out into the street, turned left and lost myself in the maze of Manchester. The distant whistling of the searchers died out behind me.

Now, I thought, I was in the bloody soup. My description would be circulated in the other world, first of all. Well, I look like the common man, and that wouldn't help them much. Second, however, they'd be sure to discover that a fellow came into a garage in the vicinity and took his two-seater at the very time the bobbies were hunting the Manchester Slasher (as the papers called me) thereabouts. That's elementary police work. So up to there all I really had to fret over was the ordinary human bloodhound business.

I'd given the garage a false name, naturally, when I took the old girl in to leave her. A purely automatic precaution. Lucky I have a turn for the criminal life, said I to myself smugly. Nothing to identify her with me, Will Chester of London.

Then there was my gear in the hotel.

Whee! I slapped the wheel with one palm. I'd given the hotel the same fake name — Robert Hood — but in my Gladstone were half a

dozen items with my own label on them. I'd intended a quick baggageless dash out of the city, before they traced me to the garage and sent out a call for a black Jaguar; but to leave without that damning luggage would be to present my true identity to the police in a matter of a few days, or even less. I headed for the hotel. Minutes counted, but so did that accursed Gladstone bag.

Then I bethought myself of the garage again. Of course they knew where I had been staying! That meant that within two minutes of the police — *they* — arriving at the garage and discovering that I had come in and hared out, the hotel would be receiving a call about me.

I groaned aloud. The Jaguar, sensitive to my thought waves or perhaps to the unconscious pressure of my foot, pounced forward at a law-shattering speed. Minutes counted? Seconds!

The hotel was no fly-by-night, tuppenny-ha 'penny wee place, for I had seen no reason on earth why I should not be comfortable while on my crusade; I put the Jaguar alongside the curb within a dozen paces of the entrance, walked nonchalantly in and demanded my key. The desk clerk was listening to the telephone. "One moment," he said, and then to me, holding his hand over the mouthpiece, "I think this is for you, sir."

MY mind speeded up and raced like a mad thing. No one

would be calling me, so it must be *about* me; therefore the police had already found the garage; and the clerk must only have heard them say my name (my false name) within the instant. I imagined that they had said, "Have you a Mister Robert Hood staying there?" or something of the sort. Now I had two choices: I could bolt at once, leave my luggage to be inspected, and subsequently have my face plastered on every newspaper in England as the Manchester Slasher; or I could brazen it out. Instinctively I chose the right course, the only course. I bluffed to the top of my bent.

"Give me my key first," I said. He did so. "Now just tell 'em I'm not in, and hang up. It's a bloke I don't care to talk to."

"Ah," said he, smirking. "I see." To the instrument he murmured, "I'm sorry, Mister Hood is out at present," and — my eternal gratitude to that sleek-haired, smug-faced desk clerk! — rang off without asking if there was any message. He had given me a good half minute of free time. I went to the lift and said, "Four please." If it had not been there I should have had to take the steps. Surely my luck was running that night!

I judged that, just about the time I struck the fourth floor, that phone at the desk would be sounding impatiently again. I opened my door, bolted it behind me, and began to throw things into my Gladstone.

My phone started to ring.

I emptied the drawers of the high-boy, the devilish jangle in my ears; leaped into the bathroom and brushed my shaving kit and toilet articles into a little leather bag I used for them. I would be certain I was leaving nothing behind on which there might be a monogram, an engraved name . . .

Fingerprints! Great merciful God!

I was packed. Everything I had brought with me was in the Gladstone.

The phone stopped ringing.

They would be on their way. A hotel detective or a couple of policemen, called in after that urgent message from the garage. Perhaps the usurpers —

I whipped out my handkerchief, wrapped it round my right hand, and started in to dust that room as no chambermaid had ever dusted it in all its memory. Each piece of wood which I might have touched in the past week received a quick vigorous swipe. Each glass and porcelain surface in the bathroom. Everything. The door knob. The glasses. Is that all? The window, which I'd raised a few times. Is that all? Is that *all*?

I believed it was. I snatched up the Gladstone and with the cloth still around my hand I opened the door and slipped into the corridor.

Close the door, son. That'll halt them for a precious two seconds.

Down the corridor, around the

first turn . . .

Safe, for the moment, safe!

And now what? Here was a flight of stairs. And in the distance I heard a lift door open.

Down the stairs I rushed, and was on the third floor.

Running for another flight, a different one, with a vague thought of confusing my trail, I stumbled and almost fell. Recovering, I fled down these, on down, down, down.

I was on the ground floor at last. The men's bar lay before me. The lobby was far away in the front of the building.

I straightened my tie, tried to appear like an eccentric who always carried a large brown bag with him, and paced into the bar.

As I put my hand — still swathed in the linen — to the outer door, the barman cried out, "Ere, sir!" but I was gone. They would think I was an absconding guest. They would pursue me. But I shouldn't run, didn't dare run, along this street where humans and aliens strolled singly and in couples. I walked as fast as I thought I could without attracting attention. The hue and cry arose behind me. I came to the corner, rounded it without halting, and saw my dear old Jaguar twenty yards off.

I ran then, for there was no help, indeed there was deadly peril, in walking any longer. I went with great bounds, brushing aside people and *shew* indiscriminately. Hurling the bag onto the seat, I hurdled it

with a last burst of energy, crashed in behind the wheel, and in a flash my motor and I had leaped forward and were on our merry way.

We had gone a dozen blocks before I took my right hand off the wheel and unwrapped the handkerchief from it, stowing it away in the side pocket that also contained my hotel key. Mentally I checked over every clue to my true identity; so far as I could think, I had wiped them all out. Now all that remained was to get out of Manchester safely.

CHOOSING the darkest streets almost without volition, I had put a couple of miles between me and that by-now-surely-tumultuous deathtrap of a hostelry. I thought of road blocks. One is always reading in American mystery stories of road blocks set up to catch thieves and murderers, but I had no notion as to whether they were used in England. Relying on the thought that at any rate I had never heard of one here, I tore for the outskirts of the city.

They would be on my trail. I kept seeing mental pictures of the alien beasts, sniffing me out like so many obscene bloodhounds. My hands grew slippery on the wheel with the sweat of fear. Then I put my panic behind me: *they*, after all would be working in the usual human channels, for surely they had at worst no more than a hazy suspicion that I could see them. True, I had relegated quite a few of them. But

it must seem more likely to them that I was a maniac with luck on his side, rather than a seer. I doubted strongly that they would make such a concentrated effort at finding me as they had done last year with poor Jerry Wolfe. So I had only the laws and power of Old England to worry about.

Going over the past hour again and again, while driving, now at breakneck speed through deserted streets and now at a snail's pace in traffic, I decided that once I had left the city I had a very good chance of escaping entirely. Therefore I set myself to leave it as soon as possible. Beneath me the Jaguar purred contentedly as my foot caressed her accelerator.

And so the notorious Manchester Slasher went into the fastnesses of the Peak District, and laid his course south for Birmingham.

CHAPTER X

I did not take the Jaguar into Birmingham proper; I put her into a half-smashed, bombed-out old building I found quite by chance some few miles out of the city, and prayed that she would wait there for me till my business was done. It was then about four-thirty in the morning.

At a little tea-and-biscuit place in the suburbs I had a hearty breakfast, and read in an early edition the terrifying tale of the Manchester Horrors. It seemed that the in-

famous Slasher had been tentatively identified when he was tracked by the police to his lair in a well-known hotel; he was thought to be either a certain Irish communist agitator, or else a celebrated American gangster who I happened to know had been killed in 1937 . . .

I walked on down to Birmingham and took a room in an obscure house in a slum district, run by a blowzy slattern who answered to "Old Mag." The parlor was equipped with a weary wireless set and an assortment of highly-flavored gentlemen in the last stages of disrepair. One of them looked like a racetrack tout fallen on evil days, another I could have sworn was a professional mugger. A fitting den for the Manchester Slasher!

I was careful not to touch anything at all until I had gone out and bought a pair of thin silk gloves, which I wore at all times thereafter. The proprietor of the pawnshop gave me a knowing wink as he handed them to me. I'm sure he thought I was a cat-burglar or a safe-cracker. No one in my new home deigned to notice them. I must mention that, quite by accident and not through any searching on my part, I had happened to strike a place where none of the other-world brutes lived; I had been prepared to see a number of them here, but only found the lowly humans I have spoken of.

I spent my first evening in going over my clothing and other possessions, ripping out name tags, obliter-

ating initials, and cleaning off fingerprints. I would not be trapped again as I had nearly been in Manchester.

THE second day and the early evening thereof I walked through the streets, thinking furiously. And the only conclusions I could come to anent my problems were bitter and lonely and hopeless.

Going "home" about eight o'clock, I wandered into the parlor and was accosted diffidently by a very low-looking form of life, which begged the pleasure of my company in a nearby hooch hut. I agreed. I would have stood drinks to a wolverine if the creature would have listened to me. I was starved for speech.

When I had bought him a few rounds, his taste running to that noble old British concoction, a four-o'-gin-hot, we began to talk freely: of anything, the weather, the latest race results, the difficulty of getting "real prime raw gin" . . .

He was a curious fellow. The name he gave me was Arold Smiff, which I imagine had once been Harold Smith; he was small and stringy and of a tobacco-brown hue, with eyes in which liquor-broken veins had long since stained the irises and the white to an all-over muddy crimson. He stank like a shebeen, his breath would have shriveled a brass monkey, but I soon noticed something really odd about him—he did not seem to be at all intoxicated. I made bold to comment on this.

"Why, General," he said, grinning wryly, "fak is, I been lushed for so long, I can't get lushed any more hardly at all. You ever had the snykes?"

I shook my head. He nodded wisely. "Ar, I thought not. You're clarrs. Me, I got a permanent case of 'em, bloody snykes and 'orrors all the tyme. You wouldn't know what it's lyke, General, seeing such 'orrors all the bloody damn tyme."

Would I not, I said to myself, oh, would I not?

"No, you're clarrs, any bloody fool could see that." He leaned over confidentially, and I could fairly feel my eyebrows curl under that breath. "Between pals, now, wot's your lay?"

"Lay?" I repeated idiotically.

"Gyme, General, gyme! I knew you was hot stuff the mo' I seen yer at Old Mag's. Wot's your specialty —jools?"

Good Lord! The man took me for a jewel-thief!

"Not exactly," I said.

WE were sitting in a booth. He craned his neck around to see that no one could overhear us. "Aye, but it's something fast-rate. You're no bloomin' snaveler nor knuckler."

"Ah, no," I agreed, presuming that, whatever they were, I couldn't be one of them.

"You're clarrs," he repeated obstinately. "Me, I may not look so likely now, but once I was Manny Jarman's right'and lad."

I tried to look impressed, and

wondered who Manny Jarman had been. A great deal of ale had flowed down my gullet at a good clip, and I was feeling reckless and friendly. "I'll tell you one thing," I said, "the police want me rather badly. I wouldn't tell you that if I didn't trust you."

"Ar! You trust Arold Smiff, General. 'E won't letcher down. I knowed you was on the lam when you come into Old Mag's. You're okay there. And you're okay so long as I'm your chum, too, see? I got connections." He brooded darkly over his connections. "Mugs, but they respects old Arold Smiff, knowing wot 'e was once. Before the gin got 'im," he added significantly, peering into the depths of his glass. I snapped my fingers for another four-o'-gin-hot.

He chattered on, in his strange drunk-sober style, for a few minutes; and then, someone pushing by me, I moved my elbow to make more room in the aisle. In doing so I glanced up. It was one of *them*. A truly fearsome beast, this one: purplish, slimy and grotesque.

Arold bent closer, again singeing my eyebrows. "I'll give yer an example," he hissed. "Example o' wot I go through nowadyes. You seen that bloke leave?"

"Yes?"

"'E were a bloke to you, huh? Regular normal bloke?"

"Mmmm," I said noncommittally.

"Welp, me, I didn't see no bloke at all, d'yer get me? I seen a great big glob o' goop! A great big purple

wet-looking barstid of a garstly freak! You think a joker's bad off when 'e's got snykes, huh? Wot about me, wot sees Frank and Stein's monsters all about?" He sat back triumphantly.

I suppose I gaped. I suppose my jaw dropped, my hands shook, my face grew pale. I don't know. For the moment the gin palace was a blur and my faculties were frozen, as Arold Smiff's words rang in my head.

Frankenstein monsters! Purple freak!

Fate had given me an ally worth more than all six of my hand combined. A souse of an ally, a lowbred criminal of an ally, a gin-soaked worthless-appearing ally; but one who could see the aliens, evidently as plainly as I could myself!

Our gallant pioneer, Jerry Wolfe, had speculated that perhaps some people could see them when having a fit of what we call the d.t.s — when they were saturated with alcohol, their vision was warped into the uncanny dimension-piercing angles which the musket blast had given me. Here was living proof of the theory. And here likewise was a fellow so permanently full of liquor (I swear the stuff ran in his veins) that he could see them *all the time!*

CHAPTER XI

“WHERE can we talk?” I asked him quietly, when I had got control of myself.

“Why, 'ere, General.”

“No, no. A good safe place where we can talk privately and without interruption.”

“Ow! Old Mag's, o' course. None better. Your room or mine.”

“Mine,” I said. “Let's go, old horse.”

We went, taking along a bottle of gin for medicinal purposes. I sat him down in the dilapidated rocking chair, in my bedroom and, staring into his brown face intently, said, “I've got a proposition for you, Arold. It's a whopper, too.”

“Big job?” he said. “You want me on a big job?”

“Yes, you. You'll be my partner in it.”

“Me?” he repeated incredulously.

“You're the one chap who can help me.”

The muddy eyes actually filled with tears; it was not a maudlin drunk's easy weeping, though, but the honest emotion of a humble workman who finds himself asked to assist a master. “You want me, Arold Smiff, to link up wiff you, a gent, a real gent, classs, wot I mean a toff as ever was? Cor! I knowed I wasn't through yet,” said he. “Just you lead on, General.”

“I was only a Captain,” said I.

“Then you didn't ave your deserts, I'll say. Wot's the gyme?”

“The biggest.”

“Bank o' England?” he asked without much astonishment.

“No, not theft. We don't have to steal anything in this game.”

He frowned. " 'Old on, now, you mean I gotta knock somebody orf? Scrag 'em?"

"Not you personally, Arold. You'll be too high in the game for that."

"Ow, not that I objecks, mind-fer," he hastened to assure me. "It just took me off guard, as you might say, you not lookin' lyke a hasher." He grinned. " 'Twouldn't be the first mug I've did in, General."

"I'll wager on that," said I under my breath, and aloud, "I told you: you'll be too important in this affair to do any murdering yourself, Arold." I prodded him in the chest with a finger. "You'll give the orders," said I.

He was deeply impressed by that. "Cripes!" he said. "Me?"

"Yes. Now listen closely, and I'll explain the whole business. Think back. Remember that purple monster you saw leaving the pub?"

"Not 'arf. Holy hell, not 'arf!"

"IT was something like a lizard in shape," I said slowly. "It had a long trailing tail, and two big hind legs it walked on; it had two sets of little forearms, only they weren't like arms, but more like big snakes: no fingers, no hands, just oozy rounded arms. It looked as if it had just crawled out of the sea, and around it there were a lot of thin silvery-blue lines, running at a tangent like this —" I chopped my hands through the air at a forty-five degree angle — "that seemed like

a background to the creature. There were glowing eyes in its chest, and for a head it had what looked like a dead fish. Right?"

"Right." He gave me a long blank stare. Then he batted his lids up and down. " 'Ow did you know? I never told you all that!"

"I saw it too."

"Garn!" he said scornfully. "Wotcher givin' us?"

"If I didn't see it, then how did I know just what it looked like?"

He thought that over, sucking his yellow teeth. Then he gasped. "My Gawd! You got 'em too?"

"Do I look drunk?"

"No, but —"

"And if I were, would I have seen exactly what you saw, unless it were really there?"

Arold Smiff sank back in the rocker and let out a wheeze that began in the tips of his toes. "My old mother! I'm off it for good. The snykes are catchin'. Ow! *O are you, mister!*"

I threw my whole hand into the center of the table, staking everything on it.

"I'm the Manchester Slasher," I said.

He recoiled. His brown face, incapable of turning pale, nonetheless gave the effect of blanching in some mysterious manner of its own. The common little thief and garden-variety mugger quailed before the celebrated Mad Ghoul of Manchester. He drew out a large clasp knife and snapped open the blade, his hand shaking. " 'Ere, now, you keep back

from me, you 'ear? I'm not to be trifled wiff, see? You touch me and you're a deader, that's wot."

"Oh, put it away," I said fiercely. When he refused, I grabbed his wrist with my left hand and struck it a stinging judo blow with my right: the knife fell.

"Ow-er!" he yelled. "You keep back!" Cowering, he gazed at me with those muddy crimson eyes wide, his mouth stretched in a nervous, sickly grimace of fear. "Twenty you done in, all in a couple of dyes," he whispered. "And I been and gone and drunk wiff you lyke you was my brother. You're mad-dorg crazy, you are."

"I'M as sane as you are," I said, "or saner. For heaven's sake, man, get hold of yourself. Do you think I stood you a bucket of gin and wasted two hours on you just to murder you in my own room?"

"Welp, no," he said grudgingly.

"Up north I killed four in the time I've taken to talk to you," I said, to impress him further. "Now listen closely, because I don't want to go over this more than a couple of times. In the first place, those people I killed weren't people."

"Garn!"

"They were beasts like the purple lizard. Some of 'em were worse. I killed one that was like a giant hoptoad with fangs."

"I've seen 'em like that . . . 'Ere, wotcher giving us? I know them 'orrors is all in my mind. I ain't no

common lusington. I knows it's the gin. I know they're folks like everyone."

"Oh, yow know, do you? Open up that walnut you call your mind, chum. Why do we both see the identical brutes, if they're in your mind?"

"I dunno," he growled sullenly.

"Then just sit quiet—there's the gin beside you—and I'll explain it all in words of one syllable."

And this I did. I went over the whole frightful business, with a side dissertation on the theory of a fourth dimension. Then I went over it again. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck two. I summarized it again. I could see it beginning to penetrate to his submerged intellect. I went through it all a fourth time, and his murky gaze began to glow. The far-away clock struck three.

"'Ere," he said at last. "You ain't loony at all, are yer? Tell me agayn about them as is in it wiff yer."

"There's an old Colonel, a real big gun in his day, with pots of money. There's two veterans, gentlemen both, and one the son of a lord. There's a doctor with plenty of brains, and an old chap with more dignity than you ever saw in your misspent life. There's even a girl, a real lady. And there's me. Do you think we'd all be chucking our lives into this mess if we didn't know it was desperately real?"

HE scratched his nose with a black nail. "No," he said, "no, you

wouldn't. I can see as you're real class, ripper or no. What d'yer want of me, though? I'm plain dirt compared wiff you."

"Why, you were Manny Jarman's right-hand man," I said. "You haven't forgotten what it's like to be top dog?"

He was immensely flattered at that. "Thank you kindly, General. You sees deeper into a bloke than most. Go on."

"I've only a hazy idea of what I want you to do, Arold, when the time comes. But here's an important part of it. Could you find me a whole raft of fellows who'd be willing to commit murder for money, no questions asked?"

"Hell," he grinned, "could a cat find garbage cans?"

"They'd have to be given definite instructions, and be the kind of men who would carry them out to the letter. And no copper's marks, see? Nobody who'd take our cash and then squeal."

"I could do it," he said, thinking. "I could get bullies 'ere in Brummagem who'd cut their mothers' necks for three quid. And they could get others. Ow, trust Arold Smiff to find the right 'uns!"

"We might need a hundred."

"There's that many and more."

I was giving slow birth to a real plan now. "It might be that they'd have to go all over England, and do these murders in a hundred different places. And they'd have to do them in a certain manner you'd tell 'em

about, see? No slipshod hatchet work, but well-planned assassinations."

"Might be harder to find them as would work precise to orders, but I could do it. I know every rogue in these parts, don'tcher doubt it, General."

"That's why you're so valuable, Arold: that's why you'll be my right-hand man. And only you and I must know that the men we'll be killing aren't truly men, but—"

"But oosluppers," agreed Arold, proud of the new word. "Oosluppers from the fourth demented, yas. Why, General, it's lyke a crusade, a bloody noble crusade, ain't it?"

"That's what we think, pal. But that part's a deep secret."

"Hot knives won't drag it outen me," he bragged. "Gawd, to think I been seein' these 'ere Frank and Stein's monsters for eight years more or less, and thought all the time it was the gin!" He made his apologies to the liquor by taking an enormous gulp of it.

"Now I've got to go away for a while, Arold," I told him. "I've got to travel all over this island, and collect some names. When I've done that I'll let you know. Meanwhile you can be lining up your lieutenants. With care, old horse, with the greatest care." Then it occurred to me that he had never asked what his reward would be. "You'll find yourself a rich man when this is over, Arold."

"Garn, what'd I do wiff a lot o'

money? I don't need much but gin and a few comforts now and agayn, and maybe a bit o' cash to swank it wif, around town."

"You'll be able to build a swimming pool and fill it with Gordon's if you do your job right."

"Trust old Arold, General."

"I do," I said. "I do."

"That's damn near thanks enough," said he in a choked voice. There was a stratum of pretty fine stuff in Arold Smiff, besides the streak of sentimentality you'll usually find in your lower-class Briton.

"Now," I went on, "here's the plan. I'll go over it until we both know it word for word."

I sketched it out as it had come to me in this strange night of lengthy explanation. Then I repeated it, and re-repeated it, until I thought it would bubble out of our ears.

And when the clock rang five, we were nearly ready to begin. But first we laid ourselves down to sleep for a few hours, till the pubs had opened again; when we arose, and put on our coats, and sallied out together to commit a murder . . . a most unpleasant but most necessary murder.

CHAPTER XII

I walked out of Birmingham alone, just before noon, heading for the bombed-out old building in which I had left the Jaguar, with my Gladstone bag locked in her dickey, or rumble seat. I had not carried any

baggage with me into the city except my razor, toothbrush, knife and automatic, and my pipe.

It occurs to me that, since she played nearly as useful a part in my adventures as did my human colleagues, I should perhaps devote a moment to describing my black Jaguar. I had bought her late in 1937 for a matter of some four hundred pounds, and except for the war years, which she waited out in a barn near my home in Coventry, we had been inseparable ever since. She was one of the mighty Standard Swallow 1008, with a wonderfully reliable three-and-a-half-liter engine, and as I've said, I once clocked her at a hundred and fourteen m.p.h. and believed she could do more. She would go from a standstill to eighty m.p.h. in a matter of twenty-seconds, for her acceleration was ferocious. Yet she was the smoothest-riding jade I ever owned. Her brown leather upholstery had faded through the years to a rich old tan, but her heart was as young as ever. I had lavished on her the affection that might more properly have gone to a wife or a kennel of hounds; in my lonely careering about the countryside in these last days she had amply repaid me. She had been companion and steed and confidante to a very homesick man.

It was a clear day, with a promise of sultry heat to come that prickled my body with sweat under the old tweed suit. I tramped briskly along, thinking of Marion — I thought of

her whenever I could, for her sweet face shut out the menacing usurpers from my mind — until I came in sight of the wrecked building. As I swung down the hill toward it, I heard voices raised in argument.

CAUTIOUSLY I slowed a little, looking nonchalant and disinterested. I walked past the ruin and from the corner of my eye saw a number of men (and monsters) clustered around the Jaguar looking at her curiously. "Aye," said one of them, "that's his, right enough. Black Jaggiar, it says here on the prints." Two of them were constables. I ambled over.

Now this was a particularly idiotic thing to do, but I must plead extenuating circumstances. In the first place, I had just been a partner in the commission of a messy homicide, and was strung up as high as a barrage balloon. Secondly, I had been hardheaded and coldly practical for many hours — indeed, since the night of my last murder in Manchester I had not done an impetuous act, nor played the swaggering gambler with death for any stakes except the highest. It suddenly came to me that I must do a doughty deed, act the bold Quixote for once, to liven up my interest and tone up my reflexes. I was never born to be an ice-brained plotter, although I had been forced by fate into that uncongenial role. Rather for me the swirling cape and impetuous rapier, the big-plumed hat and gallant ges-

ture, the fiery and slightly ridiculous *beau geste*. So I ambled into the wrecked building.

The men (and monsters) turned to stare at me. I could see the great brutes of aliens turning orange and green with interest. I had learned that they often swelled and changed color when intrigued or alarmed. "Cheero," I said vacuously. "What's up?"

One of the group, a portly constable with a red face, eyed me dourly and said, "Stranger 'ereabouts, sir?"

"I'm on a walking tour," said I. "Just spent a night in Birming'm. Saw you chaps in a rum sweat over something, thought I'd have a dekho. Dashed sleek-lookin' car, what?"

"Ar," said the constable, observing my boots. They were stout and old, the very thing for a walking tour. "You know anything about motors, sir?"

"Me? Lord, no," said I. I then giggled, which pained him visibly. "I wouldn't touch one. Cousin owned one, name of Algy; cousin, you know, not the car. Turned over in a treacherous manner and simply squashed him like a bloomin' bug. What's up with this one?"

THE monsters were scrutinizing me intently. I told myself that I needn't be afraid of their inspection: in addition to my quite ordinary features, which could scarcely have been described in much detail by their compatriot who had seen me, I was at the moment wearing the

shell-rimmed spectacles which I ordinarily used only for reading, being far-sighted as an eagle. I had put them on a few moments before, just in case.

An alien said, leaning his human form toward me, "We think it may be the Manchester Slasher's."

If he thought to startle me into betraying myself, he was disappointed. I fluttered my hands and bleated. "Gad! Not that murderer chapple? The one who killed about ninety people up north?"

"Twenty, sir." The alien appeared to relax. "Yes, it fits the description, all right." He turned to another. "Tom, you'd best go and telegraph Manchester. Sam, you go with him and bring back another couple o' boys. We'll just lay us a trap."

I walked all about the Jaguar, prodding her bonnet and peering at the dashboard gingerly. "Deuced mysterious affairs, motors," I said. "Don't see how anyone can tell what gadget to push next."

"We're a-going to lay an ambush for this 'ere Slasher, sir, if you don't mind," said one of them.

"Hear hear," I said. "Chop the blighter, what? Pip him in the early counties, right?"

"There's liable to be trouble, sir," insinuated another.

"Rather," I yammered. "Oh, rather."

"We'd like to get ready now, if you please, sir."

"Oh, absolutely. Carry on. Lay a snare for the wretched person,

lads," said I heartily.

"You'd better leave now, sir," said the constable firmly. "Before there's trouble, you know. Wouldn't want to get hurt."

"Heavens, no," said I. "I say, officer, could I just sit in that seat a mo'? Give one something to boast of, what?"

"No, sir. There may be fingerprints in the thing."

I WON'T touch a bally thing."

I assured him, and as there was no one within six feet of me, I bopped in behind the wheel. At once they all shouted angrily; but there was no suspicion of me yet. It is the firm belief of the lower-middle classes that anyone who bleats and says "bally" and "dashed" is a regular Bertie Wooster character and as harmless as a sheep, although somewhat less attractive. "Come out o' that, sir!" yelled the constable.

"Just want to get the feel of it, you know," said I reassuringly. "Want to tell old Algy I sat in what's-his-name's seat."

"I thought you said Algy was killed in a wreck."

"That was Algy Witherspoon, my cousin," I told him reproachfully, secretly extracting the ignition key from my pocket. "This is young Algy Pope, my *other* cousin. Regular ripping chappy on murders and all that, Algy is. Tell you all about Crippen, and whoozis that did in his maiden aunt over at that little place in Sussex, and all such bloody—pardon the

expression — goin's-on. Likes birds, too. Sits about in swamps watchin' them. Deuced rum feller."

Suspicion must have dawned just about then. *They* moved toward me, while the humans still hesitated. I slid the key in under cover of my bent body, chortling something insane about the mythical Algy, and stepped on the clutch. A hand was laid heavily on my shoulder. The Jaguar leaped backwards at the same instant, hit someone who reeled away with a scream, rocked crazily over the rubble and struck the road. I twisted her madly around, waved my hand in an appropriately cavalier-like manner, and sped off south-eastward on the great road that leads to London. Shouts of rage followed me. I patted the Jaguar's wheel. "Everything's all right, baby," I said. "Old Will is back. It'll all be all right now."

I devoutly hoped that it would be.

CHAPTER XIII

IT is a hundred and fifteen or twenty miles from Birmingham to London. Having gambled the fate of the world on a silly trick, and won back my two-seater from the very hands of the law and of the usurpers, I was wonderfully bouyed up; and decided to go down to my gang's headquarters and tell them all the new developments. I was aching to talk to someone... preferably Marion.

In half an hour I had left Birmingham and then Coventry far be-

hind me, and was feeling pretty safe, as there had been no signs of pursuit. Then, just as I roared into some cursed little hamlet along the route — I don't even know its name — a great black motor dashed out of a lane ahead of me and blocked the way. I saw it was crammed to the roof with *them*; knew that this was no accidental barrier, but a contingent of the enemy, either lawful or of the misbegotten underground of the beasts; and without pausing ran the Jaguar up over the curb, squeezed through between their car and the wall of a shop, rocketed on two wheels back into the road and trod the accelerator down to the floor. The black job was after me in a flash. We howled through that hamlet like a pair of greased lightning bolts.

They gave me only a few bad minutes; when we hit the open road I drew away as though—to coin a stunning simile — they had been standing still. But even when their dust was no more than a puff on the horizon, I gnawed my lips and worried. My course was known, and the telegraphs and telephones would be crackling far in advance of me. Yet doggedly, and perhaps rather stupidly, I held to this main road until I had come nearly to St. Albans, for I could eat up the miles so swiftly on decent paving that it gave me the illusion of outrunning my enemies. At last, just before the old cathedral town, I turned off and lost myself in the network of coun-

try byways.

EVENING was closing in when at last I rolled the black lass to a halt at a garage in the south of London. The owner was an old mate of mine with whom I'd seen a lot of action in the war. What lies I told him don't matter: suffice it that in three minutes the Jaguar was stowed in a dark corner of his big shed, and he had contracted to paint her a deep red hue by next afternoon . . . and to keep quiet about her. Gladstone in hand, I then set out for The Gray Gander. I told myself that (a) I would be less conspicuous there than at the toney Gloucester Club or the exclusive Albany, (b) although three of my men were billeted at the latter place, Alec Talbot was the most able of the whole band, despite his single arm, and he was at the inn, (c) I did not want to be seen by any of the aliens who knew me—I hardly realized why, but I had the creepy feeling that *they* would somehow penetrate my secret—and on the single occasion when I had visited the Gander, I had seen none of the beast-folk. Finally I admitted to myself that these reasons were so much rot, and actually (d) Marion Black was drawing me like an irresistible whirlpool draws a chip of flotsam.

I went up to Alec's room, closed the door behind me, and fell on his bosom. He beat me on the back and gurgled wordlessly. I beat him on the back and sputtered idiotically. It

was a grand reunion.

"Where's Marion?" I asked.

"I'll get her." He dashed out and brought her back. When she came into the room, lighting it up like a sunburst in a cavern, I took her in my arms and kissed her long and well.

"Marion, will you marry a poor devil who loves you in a humble but most passionate manner?"

"After one kiss?" asked Alec blankly. "Just *one* kiss?"

"Certainly," she said. "That can be remedied."

"Oh, Lord, not immediately," groaned Alec, as we began to do so. "Let him tell us where in hell he's been for seventeen years. Let him relieve my mind."

I ended the second kiss with a splutter. "Good God! I can't ask you to marry me, dearest. I—come and sit down—I'm a murderer."

"You can't call it murder, son, to chop an inhuman monster," said Alec.

"But I'm wanted by every policeman in the Kingdom. You see, I'm the Manchester Slasher."

I DON'T know what reaction I expected of Marion . . . the pale cheek, the indrawn gasp, the expression of loathing and fear . . . as a matter of fact, she clapped her hands and laughed.

"You owe Geoff ten bob, Alec!" she cried.

"Huh?" said I.

"Geoff bet Alec ten shillings that

you were the Mad Ghoul. He said—"she became serious—"he said that one just couldn't give a man the power to see such nightmares as you've been seeing, and expect him to keep a cool head and not strike at them. He said he had wild bursts of fury himself when he thought of *them*, and knew if he could see them, he'd start a reign of terror."

"I thought you'd draw back with abhorrence," I said.

She threw her arms around me. "Oh, Will, poor old Will! My Uncle Geordie was a big game hunter, and I think he was a much more reprehensible character than you. After all, darling, the beasts you're stalking are far worse than any innocent old family-man of a lion."

"Say," put in Alec, "something's been puzzling me. Why haven't the coppers spotted the license of your Jaguar? It's famous, you know—on the wireless every hour these days."

"Oh, my dear chap! I stole a set of plates off a big Daimler before I ever left London. You're dealin' with a hardened crook." I told them how I had rescued her from the hands of the enemy in Birmingham. "It was the serial numbers on her innards that worried me. Except for them, though, she couldn't be traced to me." I kissed my girl again. Her lips were like a drug, that drew me back again and again for larger doses.

Alec clucked his tongue. "Most un-English!"

"See here, chum: you trot out and collect the lads. Have 'em come here

unobtrusively by ones and twos, and we'll have a council of war."

"Oh, all right, if you don't want an appreciative audience to make funny remarks at appropriate places." He slapped on his hat and went out, while I returned to Marion's embrace. For a little while I could forget the whole abominable race of beast-people, the dire venture before me, and everything else except the incredible fact that she returned what I had always considered my hopeless love.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was grand to see my half-dozen sub rosa crusaders gathered together again, sitting expectantly on sofas and chairs in Alec's room, watching me with friendship and love. What a tonic those comradely faces were! I drank a silent, sentimental toast to them, and began my yarn.

First I told them of Arold Smiff, the cheap, crooked, gin-soaked little man, who had taken his last bath in 1922: the man who could see the usurpers as well as I could. That roused them to gleeful vociferance, which I squashed with a bark. "Quiet, will you! I'm half starved—haven't had a bite since breakfast. I want to get this done, so I can go and eat a good dinner."

"You know that when I left you I could see just one dismal possibility—a long campaign of slaughter, slaughter, slaughter. But when I met Arold, a plan grew up in my mind—"

"Like a lovely flower in a swamp," murmured Geoff. "Sorry. Pray continue."

"The whole plan," I growled, "is about nine-tenths sheer bluff; but I think it may work. Here it is: first, I travel around the country and collect a hundred names; the names of usurpers whose human shells have had more or less spectacular careers. Not those born to the purple, but those who've come up like rockets, self-made men who've climbed to posts of importance in politics, the law, and elsewhere. I've seen a number of big shots of that sort who are nothing really but robots moved by slimy misshapen blobs . . . and I've deduced (pardon the Holmesian expression) that the important members of their loathsome breed are probably those who rise to take over important positions in this world. That allows 'em to protect and to advance their secret cause."

"How?"

"By passing certain laws, and—well, here's an example. One of them commits some crime, perhaps inadvertently. *They* don't want him to get chucked into prison, where he'd be no use to them in furthering the birth-rate. So a were-policeman, to coin a name, will let him escape; or a were-judge will set him free. Get the poisonous subtlety of it? They work themselves into posts where they can help each other to the top of their bent. Even on the lower levels, they're often bartenders and hotel-keepers, who can pass quick

word of developments, and so forth. It's as if a lot of Nazis had become lawyers and judges and M.P.s here during the late fracas, and from their exalted seats had protected whole battalions of lesser spies when they ran afoul of the cops."

"I see," said the Colonel. "That's logic."

"SO it stands to reason that, if I want to put a great big crimp in their plans, I have to chop a slice off the top of their organization, rather than out of the bottom. I slew a score of 'em while I was the Manchester Slasher, but those were common low folk whom I can't see as especially important to the general plan of the usurpers. They got very peeved about me, but it was nothing to the way they'd have acted had I murdered twenty judicial wert-people, or twenty husks of Members of Parliament. My score of twenty lower-case aliens might have been accidental, but twenty upper-crusters wouldn't be. And a hundred will make them sit up and scream like hell.

"You can't hire decent men to commit pointless assassinations, so of course I was handicapped until I met Arold Smiff. In fact, I never even thought of *hiring* killers, until that night when I found that he could see 'em too. Then the dawn flashed up. You *can* pay professional rogues to commit murders, and no questions asked. So I deputized Arold to go out and collect a hundred scoundrels

for me: the most reliable riffraff available, men who would, as he says, do in their old mothers for a chew of tobacco. He's to pay them ten pounds apiece in advance, with a promise of ten more when the business is done. Then, on a certain night, and within a period of a few hours, they're to strike all over England—and slay these usurpers I'll have collected in my little black book. I understand that the underworld looks with disfavor on a gentleman who collects a fee from a brother crook and then doesn't deliver the goods, so I believe that most of these cutthroats will keep faith and comply with his instructions."

"How do you know this Smith won't do a bunk with your money?" asked Doctor Baringer cynically. "After all, a common thief —"

"Not common," said I loyally. "He was Manny Jarman's right-hand man."

"Who in blazes is, or was, Manny Jarman?"

"Haven't the foggiest. John . . . anyhow, Arold's been promised a lot of cash if he comes through; he's enthralled with the scheme, for after all he's been seeing these pink and crimson cacodemons since the early '40s; lastly, and maybe most important, he knows I'm the Manchester Slasher, and in his heart of hearts he's scared white of me. I felt no qualms at all about giving him eleven hundred quid."

Alec whistled. "What a wad!"

"Nearly all I had with me. It's

a lucky thing some of us are loaded with the ready, for this affair will cost like sin.

"Then, after our pogrom, I call one of *their* bigwigs and tell him to meet me somewhere, with as many of his pals as he wants to bring. I say to 'em, 'Gents, you've just seen a sample of my power. I've reached out and obliterated a hundred of you, and they weren't any small potatoes either, but some o' your finest. You realize I didn't snag 'em all by myself; you're no village idiots. Those killings were done by a hundred chaps who can see you. We struck at you all over England. In a few days, another hundred of you get it—and some of you here now are on that list. Couple days later, a hundred and fifty. Then two hundred. And we'll go on knocking you over regularly, working from the top down, till there aren't any of your breed left here, and damned good riddance to filthy bad rubbish, too.'

"**T**HEN I make my point. 'The nub of the thing is this: we want you to go home. Pick up your kilts and vamoose. Beat it. This world isn't your world, and by heavens you'd better leave it while the leaving is good. Otherwise you're sunk. You can murder me now,' I tell 'em generously, 'but there's plenty more where I came from. We've perfected a system of warping our vision, and every day there are more of us who can see you in all your ugliness. You can't beat us, because

we're the best underground organization that ever existed; and last night's massacre proves it. Till now you had no idea we even existed. Did you?" And they have to admit they didn't, because we don't."

"How's that again, Will?"

"Never mind. Anyway, then they think it over, and if we're in luck, they decide the hell with it, and go home."

"Leaving thousands of suddenly dead bodies, and incredible misery and sorrow among the friends of their puppets," said Geoff. "Oh, I'm with you. That's our whole objective, to rid ourselves of them. But it just hit me: what a lot of tears will be shed because we stepped into this matter."

"Shall we turn back now?"

"Don't dither. Only . . . great merciful powers!" He drank from his glass, his hand shaking. "What will we wreak!"

"Do you think it'll work, Will?" asked Marion quietly.

"It's the biggest bluff of all time, darling. But it must work!" I paused. "There's one big factor. I've hinted at it—here it is. We've always taken it for granted that when the human body dies, the usurper simply goes back to his own world and begins again by getting himself born into a new husk here. Jerry Wolfe figured that out originally, and we've accepted his theory as gospel. But I submit that it needn't be true. I don't know why I ever thought it was. How do we know what hap-

pens to the monster when its hull of human flesh dies? How do we know that it's only the puppet which perishes? Echo answers: *we don't know*. Maybe the aliens are so bound to their false humans in this dimension that when the bodies die, the aliens must die too. What's so impossible about that? After all, I've told you that *they* haven't any powers here except those of the bodies they inhabit. God knows what they can do in their own never-never land—but here, they're little better than so many natural-born people. And if they're that restricted, that much identified with these puppets, maybe even their death is mutual."

I CLEARED my throat and took a drink of Scotch. "What happened when I killed my first ogre? I went to a pub with Geoff and watched. Pretty soon all the beasts sittin' there started to flap their arms at one another and turn different colors, and then a lot of them got up and left. Aha, yes, I said to myself, the gorgon who got his has gone around behind the dimension-screen telling his chums about it. But I was arguing from a false premise. I was basing my ideas on what I believed to be a fact—yet that fact hadn't been proven at all, and probably couldn't be proven this side of the silver land!"

"Nor disproven," put in Alec.

"But I can show you more to disprove it than you can dig up to prove it! What happens when I as-

assassinate an alien? His human vehicle creaks, while he himself swells up, turns a vivid horrid blue, and goes pop. I submit that that looks more like the death of the alien itself than a simple relegation to another region.

"But I think *they* can leave this world voluntarily, in which case they go on living in their own. Lord knows how long a life expectancy they've got, over there. Maybe their time is different from ours, so that the life of a man occupies no more than a fraction of a day in the silver land; the theft of a body and the puppeteering of it from womb to tomb may be no more than an hour's vicious pastime for an alien."

"I've been thinking of that," said Geoff slowly. "I see this whole business as a kind of fierce joke on their part, the slow and sly winning of a world from its unseeing inhabitants. So perhaps they'll leave us if their lives are endangered — perhaps the joke may not be worth dying for."

"All this," interrupted John Baringer testily, "is off the track, and really no more than so much anthropomorphism. How can a man finally and definitely state *what* are the purposes of a pack of inhuman beings? Go on, Will."

"Well, to prove my new theory, Arold and I went out to a pub this morning. We chose a frightful creature that was doing some solitary drinking, and Arold, who's a whizzer of a lad at such matters, slipped some slow poison into his liquor.

"We watched him die, in the

throes of agony, which was taken by all the other denizens of the pub for simple indigestion or appendicitis. It took him twelve minutes to die on the floor. I timed him,

"THE first three minutes he just writhed and changed colors and shot off angry sparks. He didn't know he was dying. I refer to the real entity, not the human part. Obviously he could feel the pain—they must be able to, otherwise they'd give themselves away by not making the human body jump when it's stuck with a pin, or sits on a hot stove, or whatnot—you can see that. Well, after those three minutes, he seemed to wake up to the fact that this was it. Immediately he started to leave this dimension. It was the damndest sight I ever laid eye on. It was like a man trying to haul himself out of quicksand or heavy muck. The beast wrenched upward, and jerked back, and did what in any normal being would be called shrugging his shoulders, for all the world as if he was mired in something and wanted to get out. He had an awful time of it. Took him seven minutes and fifteen seconds. But at last he made it.

"He oozed back and away from that twisting body on the floor. He stood there, weaving and trembling, and I'll bet he was sweating, too, if *they* do any such prosaic thing as sweat. He was entirely divorced from the husk—which lived, mind you, for more than a minute after he'd left it. But as soon as he'd stepped away,

he began to fade; and within three or four seconds he had vanished. At any rate, from my sight, and Ar-old's."

I signaled to Alec to fill my glass. "That's why I think they die when I murder them; because of the time it took that critter to get loose from his puppet. He was scared. I could feel it, just as I can feel their ordinary waves of hatred and abominable passions. I could sense the terror that filled that usurping bastard when he knew his husk was dying. He was purely scared to hell! Why? Why, unless he knew he'd die in both worlds if he couldn't rid himself of the shell before it perished?"

I sighed. I was tired of this whole rotten business, and light-headed from the liquor on my empty stomach. I said, "It was what I'd wanted to discover, why we poisoned the thing. I'd recalled that every alien death I'd seen, every one Jerry Wolfe saw, had been sudden and quick. I'd realized that there were no data on slow deaths. I had to have some. I got it. And I say, it's two to one *they* die when the human part dies, unless they have plenty of time to get away from it. That's the reason I think they'll leave us voluntarily, in a terrific hurry, when they think there's a whole crew of seers after 'em. They don't like death any more than we do. Death's a queer, an uncanny thing. Nothing that I know in nature likes to die."

"But how did the aliens in those pubs of yours learn so quickly about the killings, if the one who was killed — I mean the one —" Marion frowned angrily — "if the one who'd been relegated didn't go around behind the scenes and tell them?"

"Oh, dear girl!" shouted Geoff. "Messengers! Errand boys! The pony express of the silver land!"

"That's it," said I. "That's what we never thought of. There must be plenty of *them* who don't have human bodies at all, and move freely in their own dimension. What's to keep them from spreading the word to their comrades when one dies?"

"Will, you've hit it," the Colonel said. "They die here. It's probable, it's the best news yet, and if it's true, the bluff will work."

"And now that I've lectured you for an hour," I said, reaching for Marion's hand, "let's go out to the best restaurant within walking distance, and have us a monstrous dinner. I could eat the proverbial horse."

"There's a place within two blocks where they give you a delightful Percheron steak," said Alec. "Let's travel."

CHAPTER XV

WE ate a noble meal, sat long over the port, and came out into a deep July night canopied with a velvet turquoise sky in which the full moon was riding high. We began to stroll along, talking of in-

consequential things; at the corner of Baker Street we split up, the others heading for their own digs, while Alec and Marion and I went toward the inn. As we passed beneath a lamp, I happened to glance over my shoulder. I do not know to this day whether I heard the foot-steps, or sensed the hate-aura of the beast, or perhaps was warned by the primitive instincts that I had been developing through the past weeks of terror; whatever caused it, I peered back down the street, and saw one of the aliens following us. In the moonlight his human body was a dark form within an envelope of gray-blue mist.

Coincidence, I told myself, angry to feel the sweat leap out on my face and palms. Nonetheless, I had a second look in a moment, just as the thing was walking under the lamp. I was rewarded by a strange sight: in the flood of brilliant light I saw the puppet-body of the man all stark and clear and black, with the distorted form of the usurper about it flaming like a gaudy, transparent rainbow. It was an awesome spectacle, and sent the cold grue racing up my backbone.

"Alec," I hissed from the corner of my mouth. "I'm going to stop in a minute. Take a good look at the bloke that's following us."

Then we halted, and to give us an excuse, I took out a cigarette and lit it. The monster passed us. I thought the moon-grayed protoplasm had a tinge of orange, which might

indicate deep interest on the being's part, but I could not be sure. When it was out of hearing I said, "Anyone we know?"

"It's a man from the restaurant," said Marion. "I noticed him looking at us as we ate. I thought he was flirting with me."

"He gave you a damn hard stare, Will," said Alec.

"Jerusalem!" I growled. "May be a coincidence, but — he's one of *them* . . . and I let him have a ruddy good look at me with that match!"

"Could he have chased you from up north?"

"No, no. Nobody followed me on the roads I took, son. But he and his gang have my description." I threw away the cigarette angrily. "Course, I look like anybody else, but —"

"You do not!" protested Marion. "You're very handsome, for one thing."

Alec laughed briefly. "Well, maybe not that, Will, but you are individual enough to be spotted from a good description."

I was astonished. I had never thought so. I said, "We've got to be careful, then. Can't let him see us go into The Gray Gander."

WE walked past our inn. The creature had disappeared. We went on a short distance, and then I felt from the prickling of the hair on my neck that he was behind us again.

So began a game of cat and mice:

which took us around corners and fleeing through alleys until at last I felt we had lost our silent pursuer, and with a sigh we entered our tavern.

I was awakened next morning, as I slept uneasily on Alec's couch, by Doctor John Baringer. He was puffing a pipe and grinning, but his eyes were shadowed. "What's up?" I asked.

"Everybody but you . . . Will, there's a lashing of people about in Baker Street. I don't know why I noticed 'em, especially, but they're there — just standing or sauntering, watching folk pass. It struck me queerly, and Alec tells me you were followed last night."

I started to dress hurriedly. "Do they look like policemen?"

"I wouldn't say so," John mused. "They're just ordinary people, men and women both, standing in the sun. I can't say I like it."

"Nor I. Are they concentrated near the inn?"

"No. Within a block or two, though; I didn't begin to notice them till I'd passed that restaurant where we ate last night."

Alec came in. "You were right," he said to John. "By God, you were right! Forty or more, loitering . . . Will's got to get out."

"Will's got to lie low," snapped the physician. "They obviously don't know just which building he's hiding in. He'll have to stop here until the fiends give up."

"Or at least until I can slip out

at night," I said. "I say! Does it occur to you that the blighters now have all our descriptions? We were under observation last night for an hour or two! Call —"

Alec was already pouncing on the phone. He rang through to the Albany, spoke ten words, and hung up with a long face. "The Colonel and Geoff are out. That means they're headed here. Too late! By the powers, we're dished!"

"Maybe not," I said hopefully. "It could be coincidence."

"And I could be the Lost Dauphin of France," said Alec gloomily. He put in a call to the Gloucester Club, got hold of Johnson, and told him to stay there till he heard from us. Then we waited, fretting, for Geoff and the Colonel: who came in blithely at ten.

WE sat there, staring at one another morbidly, and argued and plotted futilely through a dragging, hot hour or two. It was dreadfully hard to decide on a plan, for now it was not a question of getting me out of London, but of finding a haven for all of us.

"You've got to collect a hundred names, if you hope to put that affair of yours through," said Geoff, chewing his pipestem. "You can't do that sittin' here on your well-cushioned behind. Your chum Auld will be gathering his ragtag army in Brummagem, and you've got to be ready to use 'em. Look here! Why not we form a flying wedge and hust you

out o' here right now? If they're not coppers — and they didn't smell like the law to me when we passed 'em — they won't stop six of us in broad daylight. Wouldn't dare. We'll take Alec's Rolls and ditch them. Then we'll split up out of London, and you can put on a false beard and go it alone, if you like, or with one of us as sidekick. How's that sound?"

"I don't want to leap into it with both feet," I said. "Let's wait it out a bit. Maybe there's nothing in it. Maybe those people simply like to loiter in Baker Street. Maybe they're tourists, watching for Watson and Holmes." Dismal worries about the safety of Marlon and my friends were crowding my mind, preventing rumination.

So we argued until luncheon, which we ordered sent up to the room; after which John went out to reconnoiter. He was soon back.

"Still there! There's no mistake, they're watching for you, Will. I couldn't be sure, but they may have noticed me, too." He scowled. "I hope not . . . but they're clever as sin."

So, mainly because I was too unsure of myself to risk a bold move such as Geoff had suggested, we waited out the first half of the afternoon in the rooms of The Gray Gander. And nothing happened at all.

CHAPTER XVI

AT three o'clock or thereabouts, there was a knock at the door.

We all "stared at each other with a wild surmise," and then Colonel Bedford resolutely flung it open. I was sitting on a footstool beside Marion's chair, in such a position that I could not see the stranger; who said in an oily, semi-cultured tone, "Good day, sir! I'm making a survey—"

"Step in," said our old soldier.

"Step right in, sir."

"Oh, no, I shan't bother you now, as I see you're having a bit of a gathering," said the unctuous voice. "I'll call round la—"

* At this point the Colonel took him firmly by the lapels of his coat. Alec said afterwards that he never saw astonishment spread over a face so quickly. The man's mouth remained open in the middle of the word. The Colonel, a man of action who had been bottled up too long, now picked up our caller and genially hurled him halfway across the room. He slammed the door and turned the key, took it out of the lock and pocketed it with a sinister grin. Then he, as well as most of the other lads, gave me a brief inquiring glance. I nodded. It was one of the beast-folk.

"Ere!" said that one, losing his pseudo-cultured accents. "Wot's the idear, sloshing a chap about!"

"Stow it," said the Colonel. "We can see you, you know. No use keeping up a pretense, old troll!"

Good for the Colonel!

"That's right," said I. "For the record, you're a lumpy-looking piece

of dough, greenish-orange, with a tinge of maroon at the moment because you're mad. Madder'n usual, I mean. You blighters live in a constant state of ire, don't you?" Then I bellowed. "Stop him!" for the brute was edging toward the window. Alec picked up a small chair and tossed it at his legs, and as he tripped and went to his knees, John tapped him lightly but sternly on the head with a big glass ashtray. The alien sat cross-legged on the floor and glared wickedly at us, its true body quaking and shivering with wrath. "Well?" it said, through its robot's mouth. "Well?"

"First off," said I, strolling over to it and keeping a careless attitude tight-drawn about a wildly beating heart, "you'll answer us a few questions. Then . . . we'll see."

"I *don't* think," said the other.

It was brutal, but entirely excusable. I picked him off the floor—he was a slight, insignificant fellow—and hit him squarely on the nose. He catapulted backwards with a howl. Alec thoughtfully kicked him in the stomach.

"The idea, you see," I told him, "is to hurt you badly, but to keep you alive. For a while, anyway. And if you try that again," I roared, for the beast had given a kind of preliminary shrug of its real form in preparation for leaving this dimension, "if you make one more move like that, I'll murder you instant— and you'll die, both you and that poor shell of yours. Won't you?"

It nodded sullenly. Its great amorphous being settled down into itself quietly, as the human massaged his stomach.

"Whereas," I went on, "if you're good, and answer a few queries, maybe I'll let you go back into the silver land of your own free will, before I slay that husk you've appropriated."

IT watched me for a while, speculating. Then it said hoarsely, "Which of you is Robert Hood of Manchester? You?" pointing at me.

"That's right, chum."

"How did you find him?" asked Geoff. "How'd you follow him?"

The brute turned its marionette's head toward our blind companion, sneered, and said nothing. I would not have this druff, this other-world swine, sneering at Geoff; I lashed out and knocked him galley-west. Sniveling, he crawled up onto a straight-backed chair and sat there, peering round at us until his eyes lit on Marion.

"Ere, miss," he whined, "you won't see 'em beat a poor chap to death, will you? I've done you no harm . . ."

I was proud of my girl then. I had been afraid our battering of the beast would set her teeth on edge; but she leaned forward and spat invective into its face. "You foul, filthy spawn of a Gadarene hog! I'd see you sliced to fringes, and laugh for joy!"

It sank back and regarded the carpet bleakly.

"How'd you follow the Slasher?" asked Geoff again.

"We all had his description. It was known he was in or near London. Then he was seen in a restaurant nearby. Our comrade lost him in Baker Street. We've been searching ever since." The voice was now too expressionless even to be called cold. "The others will find you. It doesn't matter what you do to me."

"Aha," I snapped, "except to you! We can feel your fear, you know." It was true; he was loathsome-ly afraid. It gave me a good feeling, one of renewed confidence, to realize afresh that the usurpers were not omnipotent godlings, but beings who, like any others, could know fear. Again I thought I saw the thing pull himself up surreptitiously, like a man caught in the mire; and again I slapped his head sideways till his jaws grated. He stopped it.

"Next," said the Colonel, "what are you doing here? Your race, I mean. What d'you want with this earth? It isn't yours, dammit."

The beast looked at him. Then it laughed. Somehow it managed to get a shade of the horror of its own being into the vocal chords of the puppet, and the laugh was icy. It did not answer.

So the Colonel and Alec and I worked it over. We formed a triangle, like bullies persecuting a small boy, and threw it from one to the other, not really injuring it, but slapping its face and pummeling it until

it shrieked hysterically. Then we let it sink to the floor, and we tried again.

"What are you doing here?"

I HAD been afraid that we would never find this out, or that, if one of them told us, we would not be able to understand; perhaps the concept, the point of view, would seem as wild and bizarre and incredible as *they* themselves. But as it began to speak now, I found that its motives, those of all its uncanny race, were as plain and nearly human as could be.

"We found your land by accident," it said, nursing its head in its hands and speaking without inflection or accent. "I do not know how long ago it was by your standards. I think a long time. One of our people by a mischance of a kind I cannot describe in the words of your language was born into your dimension in conjunction with an infant of your race. When you are all dead, and we are the sole owners of both our dimensions and yours, and write history books here for our amusement even as you have done for your own, that chance birth will be hailed as joyfully and reverently as you hail the — discovery of America."

"Dashed if I hail *that* reverently," murmured the Colonel. "Bloomin' colonials . . . go on."

"I wonder if you can imagine with what delight our people greeted the discovery? How far can you

"see into our plane?"

I SAW no harm in answering that. "Not far. Just a background of silverblue lines at an angle."

"That is it. A silver land." Evidently they had the same color perception as we; a surprising but not wholly unthinkable fact. "Nowhere is there color or change of form or beauty, save in our own bodies. Your earth burst on our ken with such a wealth of beauty and such opportunities for pleasure as we had never dreamt of. At once we began to infiltrate, in the guise of normal humans; at first only by the route of births stemming from that original accident, then afterwards by births regulated and controlled from our plane, by methods you could not comprehend, which once discovered freed us from the necessity of waiting endlessly to be born into a body that had descended from that original fortuitous 'sport.' I believe that in terms of your space-time continuum, this discovery of ours has been quite recent."

I grew pale and cold at his words.

For — if true — this meant that the beast-folk could make a wholesale invasion of our dimension at any time! The brute saw me, and laughed again.

"Exactly. You are beaten. Indeed, you never had a chance, but now you have less than none. We are an advance guard, who have prepared the way for all the others of our race who will one day inhabit bodies on

your plane. We have felt you out, tested your power to resist—which has been practically nil, my friend, with the exception of your own feeble and haphazard efforts — and spread out over this island until we are more numerous than you can imagine. But with the new method of coming in, there is no longer a need for infiltrating into high offices and key government positions, as we have so laboriously done before; for, my friend, D-Day is at hand."

HE folded his arms and chuckled once more, icily, hideously. "Quite soon now, we will come into this dimension in one great wave that will obliterate your race as though the stars had never shone upon it at all! Every birth in the world shall be one of our robots — and then, no matter how you struggle and fume and plot, your people are doomed! Then, no matter how hard you fight, you will lose, for your species will ultimately die of old age!"

In the silence that followed this burst of ghoulish amusement, I heard someone who was going by in Baker Street whistling the *Bronze Horse Overture*, one of my favorites . . . oddly, irrelevantly, I considered it a good omen, and was cheered. Then Geoff spoke.

"Just put my hands on his throat, somebody, will you?"

"Not yet, son. Go on, ogre. Why will you murder a whole race? Just for amusement? Just so you can

see colors and pretty forms?"

"Yes. That simple a reason. And because we hate you, for that you have inherited a world of such perfections and do not appreciate it. To see colors, to revel in sounds and scents and tastes we had never imagined; to feel the vicarious ecstasy of these robots in acts you take for granted — acts of feeding, of drinking, of viewing and touching, of sex, which we do not have in our proper forms in any fashion whatever. We envy you, and hate you. We want your world, even if we must take its tactile delights vicariously — which is not so second-best as it sounds, for these robots are in a sense ourselves as much as our own bodies are. You who are born to this wondrousness — can you claim you properly appreciate it? Or will you admit that you have held it lightly and unthinkingly for as many generations as you can count?"

"Well, I'll be a devaluated pound," gasped Alec. "Will you listen to the conceited son-of-a-bitch!"

"Another question," I said to the beast. "How do —"

It was done almost before I could blink. He made a sudden break for the windows, one arm raised to smash the glass so that he could shout down to the street. Two feet short of his goal he ran into Alec's good right hand, swung round like the head of a short-hafted axe. He dropped with a crash.

"No use inspecting the body," I said. "His real shape blew up like

a paper bag and went blam. I guess you broke his neck. He's dead."

Geoff stood up and said matter-of-factly, "Well, we'd best be going, what? If someone will just find my pipe for me, I'm ready."

"Wait till I toss a few things into my purse," said Marion. "Can't expect a gal to flee without a lipstick, can you?"

I stared at Alec, who nodded. It was time for us to be on the wing.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER three or four minutes of stuffing useful things into our pockets and a couple of overnight bags, we went downstairs to the ground floor; turning toward the back door, we ran smack into a sentinel of the usurpers. He wavered, then stepped aside as we strode toward him. I did not want to make a scene in The Gander, so waited until we stood in the lane behind the inn before I told them we had been seen.

"Never thought we wouldn't be," said the Colonel. "Where's the garage, Alec?"

It was directly opposite the rear of the inn. We went in and, unmolested, packed ourselves into the great red Rolls. "Whither?" said I, taking over the wheel.

"The Albany. I've guns there we'll need before we're much older."

"Then to the Gloucester," said Alec, "for Johnson."

I swung out into the lane and

nearly ran down an alien, who leaped squeaking out of the way. Now they knew what our car looked like. I didn't care. We seemed to be in over our heads already.

"Do you know that in an hour or two we'll be much-wanted fugitives from the horrid vengeance of Scotland Yard?" I asked as we reared downtown. "We left a corpse on the floor of Alec's sitting room, with enough of our gear lying around to identify us all. My God! We're acting like a pack of heedless cretins. We should have stayed and made a plan."

"Hark to the Manchester Slasher!" shouted Geoff. "Why, my dear old cloth-head, the late lamented's buddies would have been on us in force in less than two ticks. Have you forgotten that somewhere in their dimension, at a spot approximating the location of Alec's flat, there's a dead beast-critter? Their pony express would ha' found him first thing. We had to run. And I didn't hear you objectin', when we snatched up Marion's intimate garments and Alec's dirty socks, to doing a bunk."

"My mind seems to be running ten minutes behind time," I said, skirting a corner and just missing a little old lady.

"Also there's this," put in the doctor. "We could never have gotten rid of the body, but *they* could, and I believe they will. They know now there's at least half a dozen of us in this business. Do you think they'll want us brought to trial? Granted

that our story would sound like half a ton of wet fish . . . would they want it spread on the front pages? After all, they can tell by our looks we're solid citizens. We *might* get some credence from the police — the last thing *they* would want. I think they'll quietly haul away that body, and set out on our trail by themselves. The time for worrying about the law is over, as I see it. There's too many of us. It wouldn't be like hauling up just one tipper with a mad story; it would mean publicity in every paper in Christendom — will *they* risk that?"

"Good for you, John," I said. "You're right. It's them and us now."

WE drew up at the Albany. Leaving Geoff and Marion in the car, the four of us hurried to the Colonel's rooms and began a systematic collection of weapons, even including a set of ancient Khattar daggers and a couple of pig-sticking spears which were part of a collection Bedford had made in India. Into a Gladstone we stuffed bottles of brandy and whisky, a first aid kit, such items of clothing as we'd need in our flight, and what looked like seven years' supply of ammunition. Down again and through the lobby we went, trying to look like eccentrics who habitually carried sporting rifles, elephant guns and pig-sticking lances under our arms when we ambled through the city; piled the stuff onto the floor of the tonneau, wedged

in once more, ran down to the Gloucester to get Sergeant Johnson, and took the road out of London to the east. As the sun was setting we left the last suburb behind, and came to the quiet open countryside.

"Where now?" I asked.

"The castle?" suggested Geoff. "It's as good a hideout as any."

So, after a vote, we struck out for Exeter Castle.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was dark when we passed through Exeter Parva. So far as we could tell, there had been no pursuit; nevertheless I felt nervous and on edge, remembering what titanic forces were arrayed against us.

The elms and oaks and chestnuts whispered among themselves as we unloaded our gear and hauled it through the great iron-banded door to stack it in the empty hall. I was standing in the doorway looking at the dark groves and the moors beyond, when Marion touched my arm.

"Don't jump like that, boy! I only wanted to ask what you're gazing at so fiercely."

"The trees. They're like so many ghosts . . . darling, I feel as though we'd walked into the dim and haunted past. This might be Glamis Castle itself."

She seized my hand and for the first time in the whole adventure I knew she was afraid. "I think it's a trap," she said. "Oh, Will, I

can't say anything to the others — after all, there's nowhere else to go — but I don't like this place!"

"It's not what you'd call cheerful."

"It's a great box propped up with bait under it, and now that we've walked under it, it's going to drop over us. Don't listen. I'm only scared. That awful man, this afternoon, telling us their damnable plan in that cool way — I feel like Peter Rabbit, nibbling on a cabbage leaf while the farmer cocks his shotgun."

"Pass me one of those cabbage leaves, Pete," I said. "I'm hungry!" Which set her giggling, and broke the evil spell.

Lugging our weapons and bags, we followed the Colonel up the big curved staircase and down the dank passage to our old quarters. We lit a lamp or two; the familiar furniture sprang out of darkness, and my gaze fell first on the table to which the Tower musket had once been clamped. That seemed half a century ago. I dropped my pig-stickers and rifles on the table. "Let's hustle up some food."

"It's stacked in the next room," said the Colonel, who had been in charge of our stores during the first residence here. "There's enough for about three weeks."

"I'll get dinner," said Marion.

"I'll go down to the wine bins and bring up a few bottles," said Johnson. Luckily, Geoff's ancestors had laid down a noble cellar full of the finest potables.

WE all began bustling around, Alec dusting, Marion clinking dishes in our makeshift kitchen, the doctor arranging chairs about the table, the Colonel and I stacking weapons against the walls, and Geoff lounging in an armchair whistling a militant tune. We grew quite gay, laughing and chattering, until old Johnson came in with his pale face grown chalky. The Colonel saw him first.

"For God's sake, man, what is it?"

Johnson sat down heavily, by which sign I knew he was terribly upset, for he would never sit when the rest of us were standing. He passed a hand over his eyes. "I was going through the hall — downstairs, that is — and suddenly I felt as though someone were observing me. You know the sensation, sir?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, I looked about, and saw nothing at first, so thinking it was my nerves, I went on to the cellars. I chose two bottles of wine and a good brandy —" he held them out and automatically I took them — "and came up again. Just as I stepped through the entrance to the cellars, I happened to glance toward the front door. There, looking in at me through the dirty glass of the window beside it, was a face. I — I can't tell you what a turn it gave me. The eyes seemed almost to glow, you know, sir. It was horrible."

Into the silence that followed Geoff said, "We've had a ghost here for ten generations, Johnson. The Stalking

Man, they call him. I used to see him frequently when I was a nipper. He's supposed to walk on the south terrace between sundown and cock-crow."

Johnson stared wildly at him as though Geoff had sprouted two heads. "No, no sir," he said. "This wasn't a man. It was a woman."

"What happened next?" barked the Colonel.

"Well, sir, I'm afraid I was so startled that I stepped back into the entrance-way; and when I had conquered my aversion and returned, she was gone. I didn't go and look out the window as I should. I fear I was badly rattled. I came straight upstairs."

You might have sliced the apprehension in that room with a blunt knife. Nobody moved, except to turn their heads to one another with widened eyes. I wet my lips then.

"The barmaid from Exeter Parva," I said. "They've identified Geoff from something he left behind, and sent the word down here to check on the castle. It would occur to them at once, when they knew about Geoff, that we might make for such a sanctuary. They've sent the word to that fearful green-horned octopus, and it's hared out here to investigate. We're pinpointed now, lads, like a covey of quail on an open marsh."

Colonel Bedford was holding a Mannlicher. He opened the bolt with a snap. "Load up, my boys," he said. "Load 'em all up, and then let's have some food. The con-

denied may as well eat a hearty meal."

CHAPTER XIX

SURPRISINGLY, we all slept very well that night. Each of us (save Geoff and Marion) took an hour and a half at sentry-go, roaming through the monstrous old place peering out of windows and jumping at every creak; but before and after my own tour of duty I slept dreamlessly and comfortably, and found in the morning that the others had done likewise. We foregathered at the breakfast table, which was placed in the center of a broad cheerful beam of sunlight that lanced down through age-old panes of glass, and we ate tinned meat and biscuits with honey and mugs of well-creamed coffee, with as excellent appetites as we could wish for.

When the meal was done, Johnson picked up one of the long pig-sticking spears and hefted it, trying the balance.

"Going to stab us a shoot, Sergeant?" asked Alec.

"No sir. It's that I can't abide firearms, while fifty years ago I was rather good with one of these, if I may say so without boasting. A number of us used to go out on the veld and try our luck at riding down small antelope, on days when the Boers left us alone, you know, sir. I think I could still wield one with the best of you young 'uns — begging your pardon, I'm sure, sir."

The Colonel bounced out of his chair. "Line up for weapons issue," he cried. "Who's tough enough to handle my elephant gun?"

"Will Chester," said Marion, with a grim nod.

I was then presented with the heaviest piece of Bedford's artillery and two pocketfuls of shells. Doctor John drew the Mannlicher and the Colonel himself took a murderous old 450-400 with which he'd once hunted big game. Marion had a light sporting rifle. Geoff and Alec, who styled themselves the Hamstrung Brigade, could obviously not handle rifles; but Alec thrust two Colt .45s through his belt, and Geoff was allowed to wear a long hunting knife—"just in case." The Colonel outfitted each of us others with one or two revolvers apiece, and we parceled out plenty of ammunition. Even Johnson had to add a .22 target pistol to his brace of spears.

"**N**OW then," said Colonel Bedford, "here's how I see it. We're in as good a place as any for hanging on: the place is unburnable, and we can hold it against successive waves — first fighting on the ground floor, then retreating to this one, hall by hall and room by room, and finally when things really grow hot we can get onto the roof and make a fight there. We're far enough away from any settlement that the noise of a battle won't carry except by a freak of the wind. We can have a nice private war."

"But," interrupted Marion, "do we want a nice private war? I think we should want publicity for it, because *they* don't. D'you see? I'm for dragging the whole mess into the open."

"And end in a loony bin," said Alec. "No, the Colonel's right as far as he goes: this is the place to make a stand, and since we know we can't escape to anywhere in this island that'll be safe, we may as well stop here to make our fight. They aren't going to bring down a blooming brigade to eliminate us, mind you; they'll think, 'Ha, there's only seven, we'll just send round a score or so to pip 'em.' They don't know we've an arsenal here."

"And meanwhile," said Geoff excitedly, waving his pipe, "Arold Smiff in Birmingham will be gathering *his* crew. If we give him — how long would you say, Will?"

"Another couple of days, maybe. He's got to treat each of those thugs to a drink or two and sound him out before he hires him. It will take a few days. Besides, he thinks he's got a week at least. I'm supposed to be meandering over England getting names. And I'm afraid that scheme's out, too."

"P'raps, p'raps . . . well, say we give Arold a couple of days, and then phone him — from Exeter Parva, let's say — to bring his outlaws down here a-whoopin' and a-cussin' in a bunch. How's that? They roar in, mop up practically all the usurpers in sight, then we catch a few of the

aliens and tell 'em, 'This is a sample. We can see you, so there's no use your sticking. Scram!' How's that?"

"Dandy, dandy. Except for the little matter of getting out of here to phone Arold. What if we're surrounded?"

"Oh, hell's tinkling bells! Where's your red Injun blood? But if you like, one of us can leave now, before they arrive. He can contact Arold, have him hurry it up, and in a day or two catch the besiegers in the rear." Geoff was jubilant, and some of his fervor rubbed off on me. I said, "Right! We'll draw straws."

"You're the logical choice, Will," said Alec. "You know this Smith, after all. —The plan is your pigeon. You go."

The Colonel was standing by the window, glancing out now and again as we talked. He said, "One minute chaps. Come here."

We crowded to the window. He pointed down to the drive. Shortly we saw a man run stooping across an open space in the old stone hallustrade. The substance of the alien body seemed to float about him like a flimsy cloak of many colors.

"They're all along the front," said Bedford. "If they've covered the back, lads — it's a bit late for our emissary to think of leaving."

We spread out over the house, peering cautiously out of windows at front and back and sides. Then we gathered in the upper hall, as disconsolate a band of crusaders as ever eyed each other with grim scowls.

We were entirely surrounded. The siege was on.

CHAPTER XX

MARION and the doctor roamed the upper floor, watching developments from the windows: when the first rush came, they were to fire down on the enemies' heads. Geoff was ensconced behind an overturned table at the head of the great staircase, so he could at least hear everything that occurred. Alec, Johnson, the Colonel and I were the ground floor garrison; we bolted off the east and west wings entirely, barricading the doors thereto with piles of lumber from the cellars so that if the aliens broke into those sections of the castle, it would avail them little. We had already carried a dozen armloads of bottles up to our quarters from the bins below us, and there seemed little we could do now but wait, there in that echoing empty hall, until our foe took the initiative. This happened about eleven o'clock that morning.

We heard Marion's warning cry, and instantly sprang to our feet (we had each been sitting below a window, trying to relax) and looked out. I was at the front of the house with Alec. I saw some fifteen or eighteen of the monstrous beast-folk come lumbering across the open spaces between the house and the drive. I smashed a pane of glass in the mullioned window with my elephant gun and let fly at the foremost sur-

per. He caught the charge right in the belly, and went heels-over-head backward to lie in a tangle of dark limbs and body, above which the mortally wounded alien grew pale and flickered and went out with a sputter. I let off the second barrel at another and reloaded hastily, thanking the powers that I'd taken this great shoulder-punishing gun rather than one of the lighter and less effective rifles; its load would stop a man even if the wound was not mortal, and I with my double vision was handicapped above my friends. It was often difficult for me to locate the vital points in a running puppet, when the body about him was distending and wavering through half-a-dozen horrible shapes.

I stopped another pair of them in as many seconds, then drew my two revolvers and began to fire first one and then the other, ambidextrously, like Wild Bill Hickock in the films. I don't know how many shots I wasted, but it was a bloody barrage.

THAT first charge lasted no more than three minutes. I should judge. They were taken quite by surprise, and comparing notes after, we discovered that they had not even bothered to have their own guns drawn when they began their attack. They must have pictured us crouching in terror, with bottles and chair legs for-weapons.

Marion came to the head of the stairs and called to us. We assured her of our safety; Geoff was growl-

ing to himself over not being able to take a hand in the sport. Then the second wave came at us.

This time they were more cautious, and had automatics and target pistols in their hands. We took toll of them with our rifles and then with our handguns; when they withdrew again, they left at least a score of dead and dying husks on the ground around our fortress.

Just to show them that we were the seers they thought us, and also to decimate the ranks of the ungodly, I picked off all those wounded robots whose tenants were vacating, dashing back and forth from window to window to give the effect of half a dozen sharpshooters. I think that gave them pause, for nothing else happened until well into the afternoon.

Alec had a grazed cheek from which the blood was seeping, and Johnson had been cut on the shoulder by flying glass, but otherwise we were still intact.

"What do they look like?" I asked Alec, as we stood together watching the deserted drive. "I can't tell much from those crumpled corpses, and you know they're so many dim shadows in misshapen sheaths of unearthly coloring to me when they're alive."

"Oh, they're — normal. People you'd see anywhere, and never notice 'em. Small business men, maybe, or out-of-work clerks. Nondescript. Certainly they're not seasoned fighters."

"It's occurred to me that a lot of

them must have got out of joining in the late world fracas, one way or another; through their bigwigs, you know. I doubt they'd care to go marching off to war in one of our little two-bit three-dimensional fracascs, and I'll bet their ranks were full of shirkers and slackers and dodgers and pseudo-conchies. So maybe they have no experienced fighters!"

"Those out there aren't," agreed Alec. "What duffers they looked, trotting up to our guns!"

THERE was one more attack, about four o'clock. This was a more carefully planned affair, and by utilizing all the cover they could, and coming in from all directions, they managed to get right up to the windows. When they did we retreated to the center of the hall; the windows framed them into perfect targets, and after losing a dozen or more they retreated in their turn, for the last time that day.

At dusk we deserted the ground floor and, barricading the stairs as effectively as we could, took up our posts on the upper floor. Sentry duty was apportioned, and after a good meal and an hour of desultory talking we lay down to sleep as much of the night through as the usurpers would allow.

My watch was from three to four-thirty. I was prowling around the halls, peering into each room as I passed, when above the night noises and the snoring of the Colonel I

thought I heard an ominous creaking. On tiptoe I went down the hall, past the stairwell that went down into sinister blackness, and fetched up some yards thereafter before a gaping square hole in the wall of the passageway. What the devil . . . ! I turned the beam of my electric torch into it. It was another staircase, narrow and steep, which I had not known existed. Without hesitation I started down its creaky old treads. The air was musty and smelled of a thousand generations of mice. More through my skin than my ears I got the impression that someone was descending these secret stairs in advance of me.

I drew out one of my guns, with a childlike thrilling of my pulse, and muffling the torch's light with the fingers of my left hand so that only a thin streak or two of brightness preceded my searching feet, I went down.

The square door at the bottom was standing wide. Slipping through it, with the torch now dark, I stood still and listened.

THE moon's rays patterned the cold floor under the windows, and across one of them I thought I saw a shadow glide. I swiveled my head quickly. Perhaps I had been mistaken. There was nothing there. The end of the room in which was cradled the massive black fireplace lay in impenetrable gloom. Watching this, I felt the skin of my neck creep and the hair bristle . . .

Something had moved in that murk, I could swear it. Something bigger and more ponderous than a body. I could not pin down the exact analogy I groped for: it was as if . . . as if the wall had suddenly advanced toward me, and then sunk back again. I husked through a dry throat. This would not do. Despite the usurpers without, I had to risk a light.

I shot the beam of the torch across the wall from corner to corner. Nothing moved. I went to the cold fireplace — feeling the eyes of a multitude of ghosts upon me as I moved — and ran the flash over it. I even knelt and peered up the gut of the chimney. Nothing. I found myself shuddering. One more sweep of the torch around the vault of the hall, and then I ran (I admit it freely) for the secret door. Pulling it to behind me, I raced up the narrow steps and with pounding heart slammed the upper one also. I saw then that it was a swinging panel, that looked much like any one of the other panels in the hall. This secret must be a relic of the bad old days, when Exeter Castle was young and the nobility was riddled with treachery, intrigue, and evil.

After two minutes of cogitation, I went and aroused Colonel Bedford. He listened to my tale in silence. Then, "This might be serious," he said. "Let's wake the others."

We did, and in the short time before the early dawn of summer gilded the east windows, we combed

that castle from roof to cellars; but the incredible fact which we had uncovered remained, not to be dispelled or explained by any means in our power.

Geoff Exeter, our poor gallant blind Geoff, had disappeared . . .

CHAPTER XXI

I truly believe that that day was the longest and worst I ever managed to live through.

The aliens who ringed the castle did not attack in force: but they maintained a kind of sullen, dangerous watchfulness over the place, and every time one of us showed himself at a window, a rifle cracked and a slug spread itself on a wall nearby or buried itself in the ceiling above him.

"What are they doing?" Marion asked me again and again. "Why are they waiting?" And I could not tell her.

The night came, but our sleep was no more than an occasional leaden doze which left us unrefreshed, with gummy aching eyes and minds gnawed by worry.

Where in hell was Geoff?

Had they slipped in and abducted him, right out from beneath our noses? Hardly. The doors and windows were still bolted.

Had he left of his own free will? And if so, *how*? And why?

"The place is haunted," Alec had said somberly at dinner; and in my heart I half agreed with him.

That night we had renewed our barricades at the head of the stairs, and kept our watches as before. About six in the morning I was starting to tear down the lumber once more when a hand was laid on my arm, and the Colonel, his face gray and drawn, said, "Leave 'em, boy."

"Why?"

"Come and look out the window. They've gathered. There must be two hundred if there's a one. We can't hold that great hall against them when they come. We've got to make a stand up here."

It was true. The groves and the unkempt lawns swarmed with them, their loathsome bodies all gay and shining in the sunlight.

"Still clerks and shopkeepers?" I asked.

"No, this is a rather less appetizing lot. More like the mugs you were always spying on in pubs," said Alec. "They look — well, pretty competent."

"We'll give them a reception," said the Colonel grimly. "Spread out, front and back, and fire into the brown of 'em when I give the word. Empty your rifles and then your revolvers as fast as you can; the fools are bunched so that we can't miss. There's not a military man in the lot, I'll be bound."

I went to the farthest corner of the east wing, many rooms away from our G.H.Q. by the main stairwell: I swung open a window as

gently as possible, then waited for the Colonel's signal. I imagined he would fire his 450-400. I was forgetting that for development of the lungs there's nothing to compare with half a lifetime of commanding the sepoy's of India. To say merely that he shouted "Fire!" in a stenorian voice is like saying that the Last Trump will be rather loud. His bellow rattled the beams of oak in their stone sockets. Even the aliens on the lawns turned to look in his direction.

I thrust out the muzzle of my pachyderm blaster and let it speak twice in rapid fire: dropped it, threw down on the milling crew with my two Colts, and picked off three more usurpers before they could gather their wits and make for the groves. When the guns were empty I counted seven bodies. If my friends had had as good luck, I thought exultantly, the foe had lost more than thirty of their number! I found subsequently that our total for the surprise attack was twenty-four or -five.

This decimation must have shaken them to their toes, for the morning wore on and no assault came.

Johnson brought each of us a bowl of soup and a plate of biscuits at noon. Staying at my post in the eastern corner, I watched the trees and thought of Geoff Exeter.

Could that have been Geoff whom I followed down the secret stair two nights since? Certainly it was not one of *them*; and Geoff of all people would have known of its existence,

for he had spent his childhood here in the castle. If it was him, where had he gone from the great hall? And what had moved in the black shadows of the fireplace? Had Geoff been spirited away by ghosts? I could credit anything, after these past months of hellish experience.

As I was chewing my last biscuit, firing broke out at the front of the castle; first a single shot or two, then heavy volleys, as though all my friends were engaged in it. I shifted from foot to foot, wondering what to do. Finally, after a searching look at the groves and lawns where nothing moved, I ran for the hallway.

MARION and Alec were shooting from the windows of our sitting room. I dashed in, said foolishly, "What is it, an attack?" and looking out saw line after line of the beast-folk advancing rapidly on the castle, their numbers not bunched this time but spread out so that they presented more difficult targets. I judged them to be at least two hundred and fifty strong. "Shoot low," I snapped, even as I brought the elephant gun to bear on a blue octopus-like brute and sent him sprawling. "Remember you're aiming downhill!"

The thunder of a battering-ram smiting at the big door seemed to jar the floor beneath our feet. It ceased in a moment, and I heard the Colonel bawl, "They're in! Come to the stairs!"

We gathered there behind our

lumber-and-furniture barricade, six against an army. We did not say anything coherent, I believe, but continually shouting encouraging noises to one another, we fired and fired until our weapons grew hot to the touch. The beasts were thronging the hall below us, converging on the stairs and tearing at the mass of impeding obstacles which the Colonel and John had strewn down the length of the steps that morning. It was at once a hideous and a thrilling sight. The monsters were swarming up at us, a foot at a time, clawing at planks and barrels and broken chairs, hurling them back onto their comrades' heads; none of them seemed to be firing at us, though in the heat of battle I may not have noticed if they had. It looked to me as if they were too infuriated to bother with guns. Like so many enraged baboons, they wanted to get at us and tear us to bloody tatters with their hands and teeth alone. As they fought upward, those in the fore exploded soundlessly, horribly, and quickly, like multicolored bags of gaudy rubber stabbed with sharp knives, leaving their dead robots to roll and flounder to the bottom again. I had run out of ammo for the big gun; howling with a kind of mad glee, I blazed away into the thick of them with my twin Colts, putting my bullets into the dark human forms within the hybrid monsters. The castle rocked and echoed with the fury of the fight. Cordite and spilt blood reek-

ed in my nostrils. One of the devils, a rhinoceros-brute with a towering ivory-tinted "horn" that wobbled as he moved, came scrambling on all fours up over the mess of wreckage toward us; I took him for my very own, waiting until he was within a yard of me and then presenting both my revolvers to his face and pulling the triggers.

My guns were empty!

BEFORE I could recover from my surprise, he had gathered himself — he must have been an especially athletic fellow — and leaped straight for me. I went down under his weight, flailing my arms wildly. I was unprepared for a scuffle and for a few seconds could do nothing to defend myself properly. Before I had rallied, the body of the creature went limp and sagged down onto me, while his true form flickered away into nothingness. I struggled out from under him to see old Johnson pulling back a bloodied pig-sticker. He grinned at me complacently. "Still a trace of the old skill left, Mister Chester!"

They were the last words he ever spoke. A volley crashed out below us, and he swayed and fell at full length, like an ancient tree cut at the roots. I knelt over him, and saw that he was dead.

I peered over the railing, while feverishly loading my guns, and saw that we were nearly done; for the aliens, sacrificing scores of their men in that wild attack, had almost clear-

ed the staircase. Now they were pulling back the corpses and the last of the impeding furniture, and only our harricade at the top remained between them and our garrison of five. Any of them who were in good shape and in the least degree agile could clear this barrier with ease. I knew we were almost done.

Now there occurred one of those queer, inexplicable pauses that come in the thick of the wildest battles, when the men of both sides seem to draw back an imperceptible inch or two, cease firing and yelling, suck in a deep swift breath, and tauten their muscles for a final foray or a last furious defense. The usurpers in the hall and on the stairs fell silent as though by prearrangement; while we humans, as it chanced, were all either loading or taking careful sights over our gun barrels.

And in that comparative silence, broken only by the susurrus of heavy breathing, we all suddenly pricked up our ears and listened. The pause lengthened, by a sort of unspoken mutual agreement between the two parties. I looked at the Colonel, and he gestured imperiously toward the nearest room that faced on the drive. I flew into it, making for a window.

Because there had come to us the sound of many automobiles, driven at high speed down the country lane that led to Exeter Castle.

CHAPTER XXII

BEHIND me I heard firing start up again, though not with any

great volume. Below me as I leaned out of the window I saw a number of usurpers come running out of the broken door to see what was happening, then turn and go in again. My attention was not on them however, but on the drive, where the first of a line of motors had already pulled up and stopped.

It was an old pre-war sedan. Its doors opened and six or seven men boiled out of it, staring at the castle and shouting as they moved.

Men! Not were-folk, not monsters, but *men*!

Had the sound of our fight carried to Exeter Parva? No, it could never produce these fifteen autos, decrepit though most of them were. Exeter Parva ran more to hay wagons.

Then the riddle was solved. The second car, a hattered Bentley, halted, and out of the front seat climbed a man I would have recognized on a dark night in a cellar.

Dear old drunken, amoral, faithful Arold Smiff! Smiff to the rescue!

"At 'em, Arold!" I whooped. "Inside, son!"

He stared up at me, then waved joyfully. "General! Hoy, General! Gawddam!" He motioned fiercely to his henchmen. "Come on, you one-legged paralyzed harstids, earn your wack! Out arms and forrard!"

Great God, did ever such a motley army advance on such an unearthly enemy? It was like the thieves of Paris defending their city against Burgundy . . . had that kingdom recruited its army from the swamps

of Hell. From the line of cars swarmed a gang of shabby, dirty, swearing men, as tough and evil looking a mob as ever trod the soil of England. Spawned in the slums and reared on violence, every one of them! Muggers, knifers, coshers, men with scarred faces and broken teeth, men fitting brass knuckles on their fists as they came, men sliding straight razors (the favorite weapon of our underworld) from their frayed sleeves and clicking open big clasp knives, men drawing automatics for which you could have staked your life they had no permits, men who were scarcely more than wild boys and men who had grown gray and hald in crime; at once as undisciplinable and as effective a fighting troop as one could find anywhere. I think I screamed encouragement to them as they came, for I was half-hysterical with relief. Arold Smiff, miraculously, had come in time.

AS they ran toward the castle I ducked inside and went to my friends, loading my guns as I moved. The aliens were still attacking up the stairs, but now they wavered as the vanguard of the thugs struck them from behind. All roaring hell broke loose.

I saw plenty of action in the last war; I saw the slaughter of the Normandy beaches and the havoc wrought through France, Germany, and several other countries; but the goriest brawl I ever laid eye on was the fight at Exeter Castle between

Arold Smiff's hundred criminals and the motley hordes of the silver land.

We were outnumbered, at the start, nearly two to one. But our crooks were professional killers, used to the mechanics of murder, and the usurpers were not. The hall was jammed from wall to wall with a struggling, howling, thrashing jam of fighters, so that often when a man was killed his body could not fall; conditions were thus perfect for our knifers and gougers, throttling experts and razormen.

The aliens for the most part had turned from us to engage this new menace. We tore away our barricade and charged down to mix it with them. I caught a glimpse of Arold before I struck the level. He had an automatic in his right hand and in his left, one of those fearsome weapons used by the gangs in their private wars, called a "moley" — a large potato, stuck half-full of safety razor blades. When pressed against the face and twisted, it made a grisly instrument of torture, mutilation, and often death. I grimaced. These were wicked men who had come to our rescue.

With our heavy Colts we blasted back the beast-men till we had cleared a space at the foot of the stairs; standing shoulder to shoulder, we bellowed, "Rally! To us, to us, rally round!" and many of the rogues fought through the press to join us, so that shortly we were the nucleus of the battle. Bedford led a charge that smashed the center of the en-

emy line and crumpled up the right wing as it returned. I saw John Baringer go down from a blow on the head; beat my way to him and dragged him to the relative safety of the big fireplace.

I was entirely out of ammunition by then. Sticking the pistols in my belt for last-ditch use as clubs, I grappled with the human husk of a big sprawling beetle-beast, throttled him, took away a butcher's cleaver he was utilizing, brained him with it and waded into the combat once more. I was splashed with gore from boots to hair, my left arm was numb from a crack on the elbow, I was whooping like a maniac, and felt myself supremely happy. I would not have been anywhere else for ten thousand pounds sterling.

I found myself next to Arold. I hugged him, and his muddy-crimson eyes squeezed up with a grin. "General! Bloody fine scrim!"

"How did you know to come here?" I yelled at him; but the tides of battle flung us apart before he could answer. I knew, though. Nobody in the world but Geoff could have brought him.

I found myself engaged with a razorman of our own forces, and had to explain who I was, in exceedingly rapid speech. Then I went bunting for the Colonel, and found him dripping blood (someone else's) by the stairs. Now the fight had become a massacre, and the aliens, fleeing, found a heavy guard on the door

and no sanctuary anywhere short of the grave. "Colonel," I screeched in his ear, "your voice will carry over this hubbub. Go up the stairs a bit — tell 'em to leave a few alive — got to parley!"

He clumped up the steps, and his bull's roar quelled the racket like thunder drowning out a kindergarten choir. The thugs turned astonished eyes upward, and the few usurpers still on their feet shrank together in a corner. For one brief instant I felt pity for them. Then I remembered their plot to take over our world . . .

"That's enough," the Colonel was saying. "Collect the remaining enemies and bring 'em here, lads."

The "lads" did so. Alec and I went up the dozen steps to join the Colonel, Marion ran down from the upper floor, and Arold Smiff pushed through his followers to wring my hand heartily. Then we all looked at the things from the silver land, and I began to speak.

CHAPTER XXIII

THERE were sixteen of them left — sixteen out of two hundred and fifty. No wonder the castle's great hall was swimming with blood! No wonder we all looked like red Indians! "Who's the senior ghoul among you?" I asked, and a white-haired robot encased by a yellow lumpy godhelpus moved forward a little. The Colonel hissed in my ear.

"Good gad, I know that man! That's Sir Lawrence Hocking!"

"He's also a monstrous, warty, holey creature, like a lump of wormy cheese . . . Good afternoon, Sir Lawrence," I said loudly. "I believe you've been looking for me. I'm Robert Hood of Manchester."

"Ah yes, the Slasher." The bug-boo that was Sir Lawrence nodded briefly. "It seems we have failed to annihilate you. No matter; others will."

"No, Sir Lawrence, you fail to grasp the situation. You're finished, you invaders. You've had your fun, but now you've got to pick up and go home, and never come back. Because we can see you."

He held up his hand. "Wait, sir. We accept you as a seer, of course. There have been others —" *Jack the Ripper*, said I to myself with a chuckle — "others who have accidentally been enabled to pierce the veil between the lands. We have dealt with them, as we shall eventually with you. But your companions — let them describe us!"

The Colonel pounced on this challenge like a tiger on a goat. I was breathless, thankful that I had described at least Sir Lawrence to him. "You're a cross between a speckled cheese and a diseased bit of garbage. Lumps and humps all over your slimy carcass!"

"Good enough," said the monster, quaking with wrath. "That will do, Colonel Bedford. I meant to say, let some of these — ah, rather unwashed gentry tell us of our true bodies."

I was turning sick with fear, the fear that now we were done for, that now the colossal bluff would collapse. I had forgotten Arold — Arold, who could see them plain as day.

"The bloke on yer right," he shrilled, "is lyke a shark, all silvery and slick, wiff a big glow in 'is guts lyke a blurry fire. Next t' him is — welp, it's 'ard to tell, but I'd say he were a ostopus, you know, one o' them big leather things under the ocean."

"Shall I have each of them describe you all?" I leaped into the breach with a shouted challenge. "Shall we waste a couple of hours talking of your stalks and pseudo-pods? Or are you satisfied? Man, man, why do you think they came here, if not to crush you and your kind? Why did they fight you with such fury, if not because they can see you in all your horror?" Needless to say, Arold's ruffians were staring bug-eyed at all this incomprehensible arguing.

"Well," said Sir Lawrence, "you obviously couldn't make so many men believe in us if they couldn't see us. I simply had to make sure." Fortunately he and the others never turned round to observe the wonder on the thugs' faces. — "I accept you as seers. How did you manage it? How did you warp their vision?"

"You know as well as I." *Now, Will Chester, bluff, bluff!*

"Yes," he said, "ever since we entered your world, centuries ago,

"we've been afraid that one day the secret of vision-tuning might be stumbled upon by some clever member of your species. The trick of it is, after all, ridiculously simple."

I snapped my fingers to show how simple it was, as I thought grimly of that antique Tower musket blasting across my eyes. But through my brain the ideas were tumbling. There was an easy way to change one's sight, to peer into the silver land. That made my bluff much more feasible!

"Yet it has been found too late, sirrah. We are ready to invade your plane by the millions, through every new birth that takes place on your globe. Can you, a handful of seers, wipe out so many? I think not!"

"You fool," I said coldly, "do you think I risked our whole band in this slaughter? There are men all over England now, performing that simple operation on others. There are hundreds, yes, thousands of us already. We're wise to you, my boy; we've got an underground as efficient as your own. Already we're spreading to other countries. In a short time the entire world will be on guard against you — and men will be assassinating you in the dark." I let out my chest and roared it at him. I was suddenly an inspired Henry V before Agincourt, an impassioned Emile Zola addressing the jury of Dreyfus, a thundering Caesar in the Senate. Marion said later that my eyes flashed lambent flame and she thought the roof of my

mouth would split. I had a great sense of my own power; I felt my frame filling with the elation of a true savior, a liberator, an emancipator. I curved my hands like talons and shook them above my head, intoxicated with a belief in my own wholly untrue words.

"DON'T you see how useless it will be for you to be born into a world where you will be seen and immediately slain? From now on, the bestowing of double vision will be as much a part of a man's life as his — his education, baptism, and what-have-you. Forevermore we'll be on guard against you. I tell you now: go home, go back to your silver-lined wastes, and never try to trouble us again. Give up your infiltrating, your bestial usurping of bodies that ought to have had the chance to live and see and feel and think for themselves. Go home, God damn you all, go home! Your sole weapon, invisibility, is gone. You don't enjoy death any more than we do — I've felt your fear! I feel it now! Be sensible; you made a good try, but you've lost. Go home!"

The mouldy-looking thing that was Sir Lawrence began to colloquy silently with his countrymen, after their fashion. I looked beyond them to the army of thugs. Most of them, giving up their attempt to understand what the toffs were talking about, were engaged in looting the dead. I wondered what to do with them after this was over, if my bluff

worked. Pay them off and send them home, I supposed. They would never talk about this pogrom — they'd be hanged! I'd have to see that they helped us bury all these corpses, alien robots and dead rogues alike, before they left. About twenty of the thugs had been killed. Who would miss them? And an event was coming — I devoutly hoped! — which would engulf any such minor event as the disappearance of some three hundred men from all walks of life . . .

At last Sir Lawrence Hockling turned back to me. All his companions, too, faced my way.

NEVER, in all my journeying among their foul kind, had I felt the concentrated effluvia of so much hate, so many noxious, diabolic waves of damnable ferocity beating against me like the wind off the Styx, turning me weak and sick. Malignant powers from the poisonous womb of Hell! I shook with uncontrollable nausea, with the dreadful revulsion caused by the towering, smashing, soul-wrenching blast of hatred flung at me by the group of beast-folk in that moment. It was beyond words. Nor was it my warped vision, affecting my other senses in the relatively mild way it had done before this. No, this was a feral force, a raging thing which knew no bounds of dimension or of the senses. It stabbed to the soul itself. Marion gave a muffled scream and huddled down on the step, clasping my knees;

even the Colonel, the last man to be disturbed by an abstruse sensation, gasped audibly. As for poor Arold, he sat down with a bump and hid his face in his hands, whimpering; having as we did the added receptivity, that terrible blow nearly killed us both. The hall was blotted from my sight, a gulf opened below me, I felt myself hurtling down into unmentionable depths of agony. When I opened my eyes I did not know what to expect: perhaps the unknown wastes and plains of the silver land, whither their foul thrust, I thought, might very well have hurled me. As a matter of fact, I was still standing upright on the staircase. I have never been more surprised.

Then I saw that they were in the process of leaving their human bodies, wrenching and hauling backward as though caught in a tight box.

"We accept your ultimatum," said the scholarly voice of the beast who was Sir Lawrence Hockling. "We are rational beings. We have been beaten, and we will return to our own plane, which lies at an angle to your space-time continuum. Please spread the word of the capitulation abroad, so that no more may die. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said. I leaped down the steps to stand face to face with his robot. "I give you three days of grace," I cried, "and then we begin to slay you all over England."

I looked from him to the others of that group of inferno-bred

ogres, shining like so many luminous bloated corpses at the bottom of the sea, with the colors of malice and savagery changing, coming and going in their rotten bodies; feeling the last exhalations of their enmity touching me like a palpable force. It had not begun to dawn on me that we had won. My head throbbed and racketed like a gourd full of thunder. Then I saw two men coming toward me through the mob, and my headache died to a near-forgotten dull throb; for they were John Baringer and Geoff Exeter.

"Look what I found on the lawn," said the doctor. "Sitting out there as calm as ice, whistling Lili Marlene!"

"What ho," said Geoff, groping with his hand until I had gripped it with mine. "You boys have fun?"

"I knew it," said I. "I knew you were the one. How'd you get out? How'd you find your way to Birmingham?"

"Long story, son . . . everyone okay?"

"All but Johnson."

"The sergeant," said Geoff blankly. "Why, he's to live forever, hang it."

"He's gone."

Geoff was still for a minute, and then burst out. "Well, don't say it like a morbid stuffed owl! After fifty years of civilian life, he smelt the powder and heard the shots again, God be thanked! So he died — so bloody what? It's how he *should* have gone."

"Right," said I, from the heart. I turned to the aliens then, and found sixteen grinning, drooling, mindless carcasses, staring round with blank dull eyes. They were empty hulks. The usurpers were gone into their silver-blue fastnesses, and the fight was done.

CHAPTER XXIV

A week had gone by. The seven of us sat over our dessert in London's finest dining room: Arold Smiff well-scrubbed and ill at ease, Geoff cheerful as ever, Alec busy savoring the coffee, John cynical again, Colonel Bedford complacent and stolid, my Marion all radiant and lovely, and myself, the erstwhile most savage one-man crime wave since Genghis Khan was a pup, fiddling with the silverware and feeling rather mournful, now that all was over.

At first we spoke of the past, as though each of us hated to think of a future apart from his companions. We asked one another questions of which we had heard the answers a dozen times before. Geoff told again how he had wandered down the secret stair that night, feeling his way along the walls, lonely and worried, and how he had remembered as he came to the ground floor that there was an old hidden exit in the back of the fireplace.

"I give you my word I never meant to use it! I only wanted to see if I remembered the trick of it.

You twist one of the hounds on the stone coat of arms, and the door opens behind the logs. Well, I did it, and heard the door clink open; I hadn't tried it since I was a kid, and I thought, By golly, what a lark to go through the underground tunnel and see if the other end's still workable! I guess I had some vague notion of us using it for an escape route, if things got too hot for us in the castle. So I went in, and closed the door behind me.

"I bumbled along the tunnel — how I recalled the feel of those damp, rough bricks! — and came after three hundred feet to the other end, where a hidden trap leads to a summerhouse. I lifted it cautiously, still with no idea of leaving the tunnel, and felt the breeze on my face; and I knew then that I had to go on. I'd come this far and suddenly I knew I had to keep travelling till I got to Birmingham and Arold. So I slipped out and cut straight through the woods till I came to the road. My lack of sight was no handicap, because there's not a chunk of turf within five miles o' the castle I don't know by its first name.

“AFTER I hit the road it was easy. I just groped my way for a few hours till I knew by the sound of the farm dogs that I'd come to Granny Moore's place. After running into a fence and a cart or two, I found the door and banged on it; explained to Granny that I had to get to Birmingham as quick as pos-

sible; and she, bless her staunch old soul, detailed her youngest boy (a lad of forty-nine) to take me there, without so much as a single query as to my reasons — and that's all. I found Arold that afternoon at Old Mag's."

"To think I was standing in the hall when you went through the door in the fireplace," I said. "God! I thought it was ghosts I heard."

"I'd have left a note, or come back to tell you, but I was all carried away with the spirit of rollicking adventure and looniness," said Geoff, filling his pipe. "I expect I gave you some bad hours. I'm sorry."

"Forgiven," gruffed the Colonel. "You saved our bacon."

"And the world," said Marion quietly.

"Yes, the world! The jolly old human race, that didn't even know it was in danger, and wouldn't believe it now if we told it! Hell's sweet bells, it's hard for me to believe!" Geoff laughed. "Did we really pit ourselves against ten thousand fantastic beasts, and drive them from our dimension by a colossal bluff? Or did we dream a long horrid dream, we seven strange crusaders?"

"I begin already to doubt my memory," answered Doctor John. "I was never cut out for a cavalier, wooing weird adventures. I'm a solid citizen. I'm going back to my practice on the steamers."

"When?" I asked.

"Next week." Now the present

had intruded in our talk, and the future. "What will you do, Colonel?"

"Been thinking of retiring to the country, but I doubt I could stick it after all the excitement we've been through. I expect I'll stay on at the Albany. Lots of things happening about one, you know, keep a chap young."

I laughed to myself at the thought of the staid old-fashioned Albany being a bee-hive of activity, but said nothing. John went on. "You, Alec, what will you do?"

"Huh? Me? Dunno," said Alec blankly. "Haven't cogitated on it."

"Me neither," said Geoff.

"Marion and Will will marry, of course," said the Colonel, as though that accounted for us forever, and no question about it. "And you, sir," he said to Arold, making that worthy leap in his chair, "what do you intend doing? You're a fairly well-to-do man now."

"Ah, yes, thanks to you gents! As generous and kindly a lot o' toffs — that is to say, gentlemen — as you could arsk for. Me? I'm going over the border. Scotland, that's the ticket for Arold Sniff: nice little village, cozy house, new name, and plenty of gin — welp, anyway, I'm going to Scotland. Never meet nobody there who'd know me, and that's 'ow I wants it after the killings we done down at that there cawstle. Some of the blokes I 'ad to enlist ain't what you'd call above thinkin' of blackmail, to put it

straight out. Course they don't know you, but they knows Arold Sniff. Me for the heather!"

"What did you think of the fight?" I asked him. "How did you explain it to them?"

"Hexplyne? To-them barst — them blokes? I guv 'em fifteen quid apiece and all the loot they could find. What else 'ld they be wanting?" He grinned. "I might have cawst a few 'ints, such as that we was involved in a political move: the boys is hell on political moves. Maybe I mentioned the Sinn Feiners, careless-lyke. They drawed their own conclusions." He squinted into his cup. "I think I shall call meself Jock MacSmiff," he said meditatively. "Ar, that's a good Scotch name. Maybe I'll even give up the gin. Take Scotch whisky instead, I mean. More patriotic, lyke."

"You'll be able to afford it, old chap, should you live to be a hundred," I told him. "It was nearly all your doing, yours and Geoff's, that we won our fight."

The waiter brought a bottle of Piper Heidsieck '43. The Colonel stood up to propose the first toast.

"Gentlemen and Marion, I give you ex-Sergeant Henry Johnson. There is only one thing we can say of him: greater love hath no man, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

WE drank standing. The waiter popped up with a second bottle. We resumed our seats, and Alec

said, "The next is mine. I drink to the good green earth, and the race of men who live on it. Maybe they don't go about slopping over with gratitude for its beauty, but I think they appreciate it just the same, and I'm damned glad we saved it for 'em!"

Half-laughing, we drank that one, and many more. I drank to my Jaguar, now a deep red color and never to be identified with the sinister black car which flew out of Manchester that night so long ago. Doctor John drank to Jerry Wolfe, who first discovered the abominable race of beast-folk. Geoff toasted our army of rogues.

They all drank to our happiness, Marion's and mine. Then we called for a fifth bottle, and drank a tall glass down in memory of our victory, total and forever final, over the beast-folk of the silver land. I twirled my glass and stared at it, my eyes unfocused slightly, and I mused on *them*.

The usurpers . . .

Sir Lawrence Hockling, to give him his human name, had been as good as his word. Within a day, all through the land, the aliens had begun to decamp in disgust. As messengers raced behind the veil to tell their brothers the sad news, the exodus spread; first through the great centers of population, London and Birmingham and Sheffield, Cardiff and Liverpool, and thence into the countryside until all England was touched by this incredible mass des-

section of a world, the beasts relinquished their stolen bodies and retreated into their own dimension. Well within my time limit of three days, the flight was completed. Some twenty-seven thousand robots were abandoned in the withdrawal.

Yet these puppets, these husks, had not died. They had become brainless, true; incapable of performing the simplest acts of caring for themselves; but they lived on. It was more horrible than their deaths would have been, I thought . . . and yet there was a ray of hope. I had talked it over with my friends, and they agreed there was a chance of its coming true.

These new things (one could no longer call them puppets, when the marionette-masters had gone) were like nothing on earth so much as new-born babies, babies in grown or half-grown bodies. What if their brains, unimpressed thus far by any experience, now began to develop, even as a baby's begins? What if they were not idiots, as they seemed to a horrified world to be, but simply newly-born humans who must be taught learning and manners and speech and all the rest, as though they were so many victims of a titanic wave of devastating total amnesia?

IF this were true — and it logically might be — then our rescue of the world would have been bought even more cheaply than we had calculated. Twenty-seven thousand am-

nesia victims to retrain is a damned sight better than that many idiots or, as we had expected at first, corpses!

There would still be sorrow and tragedy in the wake of the thing we had done. Couples who had spent lifetimes together had found themselves split, their mutual memories lost forever, as one turned infantile and looked mindlessly at the other. Men who had been forces for good in England (the usurpers were not intent on corrupting our daily lives, be it remembered, but on taking over our whole plane) had become useless hulks, great dribbling infants in old bodies. Many suicides had followed the plague of total amnesia.

Yet if my ray of hope chanced to be true, it took nine-tenths of the curse of the business off our consciences.

And some of the problems connected with the plague would then appear much smaller, and even rather funny; as for example, the twenty-seven thousand adolescents and adults who had never been housebroken . . .

Well! I came back to myself, filled up my glass again, and drank Arold's toast to Lord Nelson. How he ever crept into our party, I'm sure I don't know. By then, perhaps, we were all a little bit drunk; so we welcomed Lord Nelson, and drank to him joyously. Then we drank a final round to our long bitter fight with the usurpers, and we adjourned for the night. The next day we separated, each to his own place,

and the great adventure was over at last.

CHAPTER XXV

IT is just a year since we drove the usurpers out of England.

(About the robots that they left behind, my hunch was right; for they are learning to take care of themselves, to walk and speak and act decently, and many have even begun to read and think again. When I consider this, I am inclined to go to my knees in thanks. What *wight* have happened . . . !)

For a while I could not realize that my wild bluff had actually worked. I kept expecting a trick, a wholesale re-invasion of our world by the ogres. Even yet it is hard to comprehend. I suppose the only explanation is that all created things hate and fear death; in their fashion, the usurpers were just as scared of dying as the humblest human, and must have decided that the vicarious pleasures of earth weren't worth it.

Selfish fear gripped them, selfish deadly fear of murder in the dark. They shrugged themselves out of their stolen bodies, and abandoned the world they had hoped to conquer. The simplest of weapons, the easiest to employ, had done our work for us in a manner beyond our most optimistic dreams. The simplest weapon . . . fear.

Marion and I were married, of course, a year ago. The delirious happiness of our marriage has not cooled for me. Some day, perhaps,

my feeling will have calmed to a steady, staid, cozy sort of affection; but not yet. Not for a long time yet.

I bought a little bookshop in Bury St. Edmunds, and took in Geoff and Alec as partners. It's the proper life for a quartet of reformed crusaders like the three of us and Marion. Peaceful, contemplative, and yet stimulating. We like it. And we like being together.

John is back on the seas as ship's doctor, the Colonel is laired up at the Albany, and Arold lives in Kirkcudbright, swilling great vats of Scotch whisky, I have no doubt. One day soon we must all get together for a grand reunion . . .

BUT a man cannot walk through fire without being hurt; and as there cannot be many such conflagrations as that through which I groped and fled and sought my way, it is only natural that my mind carries even yet a few scars of the burning. I do not expect — I dare not hope — that they will ever be wholly healed.

In certain moods, usually on dreary days when the sky is overcast and the sun is hidden, or sometimes at night when the great yellow hunter's

moon rides in a black sky, the horror of the usurpers comes upon me with fresh and lurid obsession, more appalling than ever it was in the weeks of my hectic and headlong warfare. Then I go out into the streets or wander on the moorlands and fight with my hallucinations. A thousand times I tell myself that *they* are gone, that the world is clean and inviolate again; and a thousand times I hear in reply the hideous laughter of the fear that lives forever at the bottom of my soul.

I walk past a tavern, and see its door swing open, and catch a glimpse of the harman; and he seems to me in that moment to be, not a jovial red-faced fellow, but a twisting writhing monster shot with vivid lights and fringed with rippling pseudopods. A friend comes up behind to clap me on the shoulder, and I dread to turn and look at him, for fear of what he may be. I hear a snatch of speech from a wireless set, and the soft cultured voice emanates, I believe in a sudden jolt of panic, from the lips of a marionette-creature controlled by a hellish and malevolent incubus.

So at last I take my terror home to Marion, and lose it in her arms . . .

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURE NOVEL:—

SPECIAL DELIVERY

by KRIS NEVILLE

Peril comes to Earth in the guise of a human to pave the way for an invasion. The plan was unique—with every person on Earth being sent a special delivery package! Watch for the

JANUARY ISSUE ON SALE THE FIRST WEEK IN NOVEMBER

In The Beginning . . .

PROFESSOR George Gamow, the famed astrophysicist and popularizer of astronomy is well known for his habit of coining new words. His latest is a word necessary to describe the state of the Universe an almost infinitely long time ago.

He believes (and many modern scientists concur) that "in the beginning . . ." the universe was made up of a very dense mass of protons, electrons and neutrons, jammed together inconceivably tightly, and surrounded by empty space. This

vast mass together with its surrounding space constituted the primal matter of which the universe was made. Gamow calls it "ylem"—this time not a coined word really, but an ancient one meaning primitive.

Unfortunately Gamow doesn't present a perfectly clear picture of the initial stimulus that caused this ylem to disintegrate and form our present matter, though the process by which this occurred is pretty well worked out.

America Needs Jets!

IN spite of all the griping and the meaning by people conscious of the role of American technology in world affairs, the manufacturers and the government sit idly by while the British engineers and aerodynamicists steal the golden prize of commercial jet flight from under our nose. Why can't something be done about it?

In a matter of time the British will institute overseas flights with gigantic streamlined jet liners called "Comets." They will be used all over the world starting at first with the London-New York flight. Flying times will be reduced sharply, this last-named flight being a matter of little more than six hours!

This pre-eminence of the British in commercial jet planes does not mean that they're better than we are—far from it. We have superb jet motors too, but we've limited ourselves to fighter and bomber planes, ignoring the fact that it is

commercial aviation which precedes powerful military aviation. Private companies claim that they can't afford to experiment with jet craft and must cling to the out-moded internal combustion reciprocating engine. That's like saying, "I'll stick to the horse and buggy; I can't afford a car!"

This is a plea to the government to do something. Until now America and American planes have been outstanding, the backbone of the world's commercial aviation. Apparently this is not true now. The world's airlines—including our own—will be forced to buy British jet-airliners in order to stay in competition. Let's do something about it.

Remember jet motors are one stage removed from rockets — and those are the motors of the future. Dare we allow America to lag at all in this field? The answer is a simple, unequivocal NO!

* * *



As he looked through the glassite hull of the space ship at the surface of the Moon a strange thing happened. A shimmering figure appeared in a halo of light.



They Reached For The Moon

By William Oberfield

The major problem in achieving space flight lay in overcoming gravity. That had been done and men had reached the Moon. But strangely, they never returned!

THEY took a thousand days to build the great, gleaming monster, and another two hundred to groom it for its trip around the moon. All this they did with an air that made a trip to the moon seem quite natural and sure, even though three other rockets had gone before and not one had returned.

"This one will," they said, as though convincing themselves.

But they were not sure. They were stubborn, perhaps proud, but not sure at all. All the world had watched three other such rockets, with men in them, go screaming off moonward. All had waited for them to return. And all had seen nothing come back down from the sky. Not even a small scrap of metal. This one *might* return, and, if it did, the men in it just *wight* be alive to tell. But that was not being sure.

"A military base on the moon!" the leaders had cried. And that had been that. Robot rockets had gone first. They had landed on the moon. They could do that, but they could not establish the desired base. So men had started on a round trip, around the moon, first to prove that men could do it. The only thing they proved was that whatever goes up need not come down.

Now the fourth rocket waited, leaning over against its heavy launching rack, ready to face whatever unknown danger lay out there beyond.

On a certain night, a night long appointed, one overshadowed with

heavy clouds that brought a threat of rain, there were lights about the rocket and in the low, concrete buildings that cowered back a ways from the upright metal giant. Around the base of the rocket men scurried like ants, making last minute preparations and seeing that everything was just so and not being satisfied with "good enough".

In one building, a little nearer the rocket than the others, two men lounged, talking of the coming trip and other things that concerned last night's women, and smoking endlessly, the last smokes they would have for four days. These men would soon climb into a long, metal thing and try to do what others had failed to do.

In other buildings were men with great ideas held firmly in their minds, doing things with pencils and paper and adding machines. These checked back over figures and charts, knowing all the time that everything was flawless, but checking just the same. Some were Army men and some were not.

The feeling that seemed to grow over everything was one of waiting and suspense, and one might know without asking, without seeing the many glances at watches and clocks, that it would soon be time.

STRANGELY, the two men waiting and speaking mostly of wine, women and general good times, knew very little of the import of what they were about to do. In fact, they had no real concept of even

the size of the earth, let alone the magnitude of space, the moon and the stars. This, however, was as intended.

The men who had gone in the other rockets had been scientists, greatly skilled men, men of high I.Q.'s. So the brass and the brains had gotten together and reasoned, and pooled data, and considered statistics, and finally decided that the strain of being completely out of one's natural element, exposed to the terrible, thought-twisting blankness of space, might be greater than had been supposed. And the high-strung, sensitive, sometimes slightly neurotic minds of the highly intelligent might well be expected to crack under the strain.

This, of course, was at most a poor explanation. But it served, at least, as an excuse for retaining the great minds and sending those more expendable. These, not knowing, would probably consider the whole thing nothing more than a slightly unusual adventure.

So when the Army officers came, very stiff and orderly, and opened the door to the little building, the two men came out laughing and pushing at one another playfully. They followed the little group of officers toward the gleaming rocket, not at all worried, like men going off for a happy spree at some local bar.

The rocket seemed to loom higher as they neared it. It was now bathed in the light of many spot-

lights, reflecting back the light in such a way that one might think he would go blind if he looked too long. Only when they stepped on to a platform, with two of the higher officers, and were lifted swiftly upward, did they give a thought to what was going on.

The platform halted its climb just below a round hole near the nose of the rocket.

"You men should know exactly what you are to do," said the higher officer, "and that is not much. You are not, under any circumstances, to touch anything until you near the moon. Up to that time, the rocket will be guided by at least one control station here on Earth." The officer paused and tried to see understanding in the eyes of the two. He was one of those who did not agree with sending such dense fellows.

"You have been trained for months," he continued, "to read a few instruments and to perform the fairly simple tasks required to take you around the moon and start you back. Do only what you have been taught. Do nothing more. You must remember that certain conditions near the moon, which interfere with radio reception, and which we have been unable to overcome, will put you entirely on your own until you start back."

One of the men, a little uncertain, acted as if he wished to speak.

"Yes?" said the officer.

"Didn't they send rockets once

without so men in 'em at all?" he asked. "Then, how come they can't do like we wasn't even there?"

"My dear fellow," said the officer, perplexed, "to aim and fire a rocket at so near and so large a target as the moon is a simple matter. To guide one around the moon in a precise orbit is a matter entirely different." He paused. "Any more questions?"

"No sir," said the men.

"Very good." The officer seemed glad there would be no further conversation. "In you go now."

The men went into the opening, helped by the officers, like olives being put into a bottle. In a moment the officers had gone and a cover had been placed into the opening and screwed firmly into place.

THERE was lead-glass, very heavy, in the windows of all the buildings. The thick cement walls and doors were covered with sheets of lead.

Inside the most distant buildings, at the small windows, men stood with black looking glasses over their eyes, watching. Each time a rocket went into space it was exactly thus. The atomic drive was new and not completely perfect. Always there was a chance that something might go wrong. The radiation grids could go haywire, there could be an explosion, or the ship could falter and slip on the way up.

So the men waited and watched in their little buildings, with fingers crossed, hoping for the best.

Now it was very quiet. The spotlights had been extinguished because every bit of electric power was needed to start the amazing rocket motor. Only enough was spared for lighting, where needed, in the buildings, and for the P.A. system. And over the P.A. system voices spoke.

"Trackers ready?"

"Trackers ready."

"Control station ready?"

"Control station ready."

"Radio room, report!"

"Radio reporting. All tracking and control stations reported or relayed in."

There was a pause. Then: "Stand by." The silence seemed to grow even more intense. The ticking of clocks and watches could be heard. The unreal atmosphere of a dream settled over the clustered buildings on the plain.

"Activators!"

Out on the plain, the rocket came to life. It surged and clattered against its launching rack, nearly leaping, pawing the ground with hot explosive blasts. Now it became a living wild thing, a bound monster surging against its chains, fighting to be free and away.

The voice, in a short while, came again, a little strained. "Ready . . . Ready . . . Ready . . . ROCKET AWAY!"

The great, gleaming monster lift-

ed up from the plain, bellowing its defiance of space with the voice of ten thousand waterfalls. It rode up from the center of a tremendous flower of glowing dust on a pillar of intense blue flame, slowly gathering speed, like a whale rushing up from the depths of the ocean.

For a while it lighted up miles of rolling plain with its glare, and sent its thunder out to crash against distant hills. Then it was gone beyond heavy clouds, leaving only a smear of light above and a hollow, boiling rumble, muted by distance.

In the thin, cold air above the clouds the rocket pointed its sharp nose eastward. It raced across the sky, a blue streaking and a stuttering scream. It crossed a nation with amazing speed and moved over the Atlantic.

In an instant the moon and the stars were gone and the rocket was looking at the sun. Clear morning fled away in fear of this flaming beast and it was noon within minutes after sunrise. In an hour the night returned, the stars and the moon with it.

“**B**ROTHER, we’re in!” cried Pfc. Walter Jones, in the head of the rocket. “Boy, the babes’ll mob us after this. Real big shots, that’s us. The men in the moon! Hah!”

“If we get back,” Pvt. Robert Moore shouted over the roar. “Remember, we gotta get back yet.”

“Chicken!” shouted Jones.

“Chicken’s what you are!”

“Oh yeah? So what happens to them guys what went before?”

“Nuts to that,” Jones sneered. “I hear they’s a lot of places up in space we don’t know nothin’ about, where there’s maybe a lot of nice babes and buildings made out of gold and stuff like that.”

“Scientists don’t go much for babes,” Moore said.

Jones kicked back in his seat, roaring laughter. “Hah! Don’t kid yourself, son. Anyway, so what? So they get a chance to be kings, or somethin’, on account of being from Earth. What do they do? They stay an’ be kings, natch’!”

“It ain’t for me,” said Moore, moodily. “I know babes on good ol’ Earth. An who wants to be king?”

“That’s what I’m tellin’ you,” Jones shouted. “We ain’t got no worry at all. All we gotta do is not let them guys up there side-track us.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Moore.

They fell silent, looking down at the reeling Earth. On the ground, two hundred miles below, at every tracking and control station around the world, men worked without pause, trying to make their tired minds outrace a speeding rocket. Night side and day side, messages flashed through the ether. They reported in: position, time, corrections made, passing the rocket quickly, from one to another like a hot potato.

On its last lap around the world before flinging itself moonward, the rocket screamed across the much worn boot of Italy. It climbed swiftly up the sky of the Holy Land and plunged down in the east, drawing a blue pencil line across the heavens that faded slowly.

At last it turned upward, and breathing streamers of fire and light, shot into airless space, a silver arrow gone from the bow and dead on its mark.

"It sure seems quiet," said Moore.

They looked through the glassite port into the great distances.

"Quiet, and empty."

"Yeah!"

"Do you feel different?" Jones asked suddenly.

"I don't know. Maybe. In a way."

"Like you can think a lot better?"

"Something like that," Moore said.

THEY sat and thought about it.

The rocket was now fifteen hundred miles up, climbing swiftly.

"For one thing," Moore said, "we are lighter. What do they call it? Gravity? Gravity is less."

"I don't like it," cried Jones. "I don't like it at all!"

"What?" Moore looked at him.

Jones stared back, frightened. "It's nothing like I thought it would be. Maybe we'll get so light there won't be anything left! Where is everything? It's so empty it don't

make sense. Something's wrong, Bob. Let's try to turn back before we die like the others! I don't want to die! I want——"

Moore reached over and slapped the other's face, hard. Jones focused glassy, unsteady eyes, surprised and hurt. "Why did you do that?"

"You called me yellow a while ago," Moore said, disgusted. "Now it's you who are acting like a woman or a child. You would really kill us, trying to turn back at this velocity."

"I'm still afraid," Jones said, but not wildly. "I don't know what's happening to me. I can remember things that happened years ago; things I hardly noticed. I'm starting to understand things I never understood before, and some of the things are hard to take."

"Don't you think I feel it, too?" Moore looked out at space in a new way, understanding.

For a while there was silence, a little strained, while the rocket sped another thousand miles. After that it was not so strained. It was more an atmosphere of concentration, of two men, thinking within themselves. There was no more fear.

"So this is what happened to the others," Moore said finally. "But what do we have to fear?"

Jones shrugged. "I'm not afraid anymore, but maybe I should be." He leaned back and looked at Moore. "Have you any idea what is happening to us?"

"I'm not sure," Moore frowned.

"It's as if some great obstacle to clear thinking has been removed. Have you noticed how we have been speaking? Our memory has so improved that we are able to use words we may have seen or heard used only a few times. And the new sharpness of mind that enables us to use these words properly also makes us able to grasp quickly new ideas and to reason logically. As to what causes the change, I do not know."

"I have been thinking about gravity," said Jones, reflecting. "It seems to me that the change in mental power is just about inversely proportioned to change in gravity. That might, in some way, have something to do with it."

Moore sighed, frowning. "You may be right. But, granting that you are, we are still in the dark as to the nature of the danger we must face."

"I think I'm beginning to get some idea," said Jones. "I wouldn't be surprised if my first crude idea, in a way, was very nearly right."

Moore showed surprise. "You still think those others found someone out here who made them kings, or some such?" He laughed.

"Not exactly," Jones said. "But there may be even stranger things." And he would say no more.

AT fifty thousand miles they had lost all thought of danger. They spoke of space and the unseen medium that must be there. After form-

ing the only logical conclusion about the nature of this, they passed on to matters of relativity and the nature of time and of life itself, understanding each in its turn.

They became so absorbed in conversation they did not even notice when they stopped talking and conversed in pure thought. Not even did they realize that a golden glow had come to their faces and bodies that was not simple light. And they were content in knowing they would never return to earth, knowing also that they would not die.

The rocket carried them one hundred thousand miles through space before it happened.

"There is someone behind us," Jones said, simply.

They looked, and beheld a man standing in space. He was hardly a man anymore, as men are called, but one like themselves. A golden glow seemed to blend with him. He smiled.

"Welcome!"

"We have been expecting you," said Moore, smiling in return. "Your voice, your thoughts reached us. We know you are one of those who came out in a rocket before us. But your name is not clear."

The being seemed mildly surprised. Then he laughed; a thing that was as the tinkle of small bells, as the dew of a cool meadow before the rising sun or the joyous song of a nightingale.

"I am one of them," he said, "and all of them. We who have

overcome the chains of gravity, who have become one in thought and find it impossible to do otherwise, have no need for individuality."

"But you have a body," said Jones. "Surely that gives you some sort of individuality."

"Yes, if one's mind is bound, controlled by matter. But the mind working without resistance is a perfect machine. It is able to control matter in every respect. We take this form or that form as a matter of expedience."

"We have reasoned that all this is due to release from gravity," Moore reflected. "But we do not understand completely. Will you tell us?"

"Even those on Earth know that gravity hampers the mind," the being said. "This they have learned through observation of mental factors in relation to the gravitational pull of the sun and moon. But look into my mind and you will see more clearly."

They looked, and saw a copper disk turn before a powerful magnet. And they saw resistance caused by electric currents induced in the copper, so that a great deal of power was required to turn the disk, even slowly. This, the thoughts indicated, was a principal well known to those yet on Earth.

Next came the relationship between magnetism and gravity, clearly demonstrated.

They then saw a human brain,

locked in the powerful embrace of gravity. And the tiny pulsations and complex motions, the processes of thought, were, as with the disk, sluggish—in large portions not even present. They watched a brain come alive as gravity decreased. It bulged, the tempo of motion rising, parts long dormant surging with power. They saw and they understood.

"If only we could go back and help them," sighed Jones. "If we could overcome that gravity on Earth!"

Again the being smiled his kind smile. "If you returned it would be to the same mental prison. You could not, in your crude manner, convince them."

The two knew what they must do, even before the being spoke again.

"The others, the rest, wait beyond the light of universes," he said. "We think. We learn. Soon, we will find a way of helping those on Earth, and we will return. Come with me."

They replied together. "We are ready."

On the dark side of the moon, where they had been projected by identical velocities, lay the battered wrecks of four gleaming rockets. And in all the wreckage, among all the bits of twisted metal, there was not a single drop of human blood.

THE END

Sound And Fury . . .

THE name of Professor Hans Thirring is becoming increasingly well-known in the scientific world, not because of any great discoveries the good Doctor has made, but rather for some unusual calculations he has performed. Dr. Thirring is Austria's foremost physicist and has contributed some notable discoveries to physical science. Among Europeans he now knows as much about the theory of atomic and hydrogen bombs as anyone there. He has put this knowledge into a graphical, easily understandable form which is rapidly penetrating the consciousness of people everywhere.

In terms of what he knows about atomic physics and modern industry, he has computed that a first-rate industrial country like the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Russia—that's about all—can, at the expenditure of around forty billion dollars, destroy all Mankind!

When that statement was first made and the evidence submitted, Thirring was laughed at. An examination and a check of his work by American and foreign physicists has since disclosed that it is remarkably accurate—he is not exaggerating at all.

He takes as his starting point, the hydrogen bomb, which is yet to be developed. This instrument of destruction must be triggered or fired by an atomic bomb. Then the hydrogen bomb is surrounded with a shell of cobalt metal. When the atomic bomb is detonated it fires the hydrogen bomb, which in turn goes off and vaporizes the cobalt metal, turning it into a deadly ra-

dioactive vapor.

By exploding a fair number of these "ultra-bombs" the entire atmosphere of the Earth would quickly be polluted with deadly radioactive cobalt which would reach into every nook and cranny—from the Antarctic to the Equator. After a short time, no living thing would live on this planet—it would be utterly sterilized!

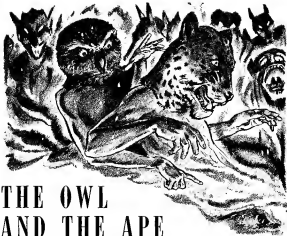
Professor Thirring is not just beating his gums as an alarmist. Instead, in a remarkably cool and concise calculation he has shown that Man does hold the power to destroy himself—if not immediately, within the very near future.

The explosion of these bombs would contaminate the air, the land and the oceans. Nothing living, animal or vegetable, would survive from the depths of the sea to the greatest heights.

But the organic cycle could start over again, Thirring assures us. Plant life buried deep in the soil would stand some chance of surviving and hence the entire chain of evolution might be gone through again. When asked how long he imagined it would take for the second coming of Man, Thirring replied "about two billion years!"

Man has been on the Earth for a little more than three hundred thousand years. It is incredible to think that he has reached such great heights—and such great depths.

The future indeed appears black. Man holds it in his power to convert this Earth, through the miracle of technology, into a paradise, or into a barren spherical shell—which shall it be . . . ?



THE OWL AND THE APE

By
L. Sprague De Camp

**Soncheth Sar wanted the magic manuscript,
so he sent his young apprentice to buy it. That
was simple enough. Delivery was another matter!**

DJARRA was always promising to complete Gezun Lorska's education for him and never getting around to it. This was one of the times:

"... so if you'll come into the garden after the supper-hour, Gezun, I'll show you some of the

singular things one of Father's sailors taught me . . ."

Gezun Lorska said: "Meseems I've heard all that before." He grasped her wrist. "I suspect that what you really yearn for, my lass—"

"My goodness, Gezun!" she said.



"Aren't you strong! Are you *rare* you're only fourteen?"

"Quite certain." (Actually he thought his fourteenth birthday was yet some days off. In the year since he had been sold to Sancheth Sar he had somewhat lost track of time, and moreover the calendar used here in Ezvelar differed from that of his native Lorsk. Still, her question had cogency, for a fourteen-year-old Pusaadian like Gezun might well be as tall as a mature Hauskirka.)

"As I was saying," he continued, "I'm a peaceable wight, and like not to slay folk save those that wantonly offend me. But I take not teasing kindly, and am minded to drag you back into this fabulous garden of yours . . ."

"Not *now*!" she squeaked. "Mother's hanging out the—"

"*Gezun! Gezun Lorsk!*" came the familiar caw of Sancheth Sar. "Boy! Hither, forthwith!"

Gezun dropped Djarra's wrist. "Run along, Djarra, this is men's business."

He stuck his thumbs into the belt of his kilt and ambled around to the front of Sancheth Sar's house, fast enough to avoid serious trouble with his owner but not so fast as to give the old wizard exaggerated ideas of his submissiveness. He was secretly grateful to Sancheth for rescuing him from what might, as a result of his own youthful ignorance, have developed into an embarrassing situation.

What if Djarra had said "Yes"?

"You take long enough, you young bull-mammoth," said Sancheth Sar, leaning on his stick and glaring down his hawk's nose. Though in former years the sorcerer had stood a good span taller than Gezun did now, age had bowed him until the difference was no longer great.

"Yessir sorrysir."

"When you apologize, speak distinctly and run not all your words together; else the whole effect be lost." The sorcerer blew his nose on his mystic robe and continued: "Where was I? Ah, yes, the auction."

"What auction, Master?"

"Why, bout the auction of Dauskezh Van, what else? But I forget; I've not advised you thereof. Dauskezh Van, wishing to retire from active practice of the arts sorcerous and thaumaturgic, has—"

"Who's Dauskezh Van?"

"**S**UCH ignorance! He's the greatest, the wisest, the profoundest magician ever to practice in Nembiar. But now, despite all that longevity and rejuvenation spells can do, age claims him for its hoary own. Where was I?"

"You were telling me about the auction."

"So I was. Well, wishing to retire from practice and spend the balance of this life in peace, he's selling off all his magical talismans, tokens, sigils, relics, and other ac-

cessories. I was to have departed to wend my way to his cave on Tadhik Mountain in rocky Gozau beginning on the morrow, but now that Nikurteu has sent this cursed tickle upon me I must remain at home my infirmities to cherish." He sneezed.

"You mean you wish me to go to Gozau in your stead?" cried Gezau, torn between excitement and apprehension.

"With admirable promptitude you grasp my meaning ere I've formulated it in words. Aye, boy, the task is yours to dare and do."

"What do you wish me to seek to buy? Anything that seems good?"

"By no means! But one particular item, namely: the Hordhun Manuscript."

"What's that?" said Gezau.

"As the name implies, a set of waxen sheets with pictographs inscribed thereon."

"I mean, what's in it?"

"Spells."

"What sort of spells?"

"Curse you for a nosey quidnunc! But then, perhaps indeed you ought to know, that you shall watch well where you place those monstrous feet of yours. As you are no doubt aware, your land of Pusaad is slowly, in the course of many earthquakes, sinking beneath the waters of the Western Sea."

"So I've heard. 'Tis said that one can take a boat in the harbor of Bienkar on a calm day and

through the water see the ruins of former edifices, once on dry land but now paving the harbor-bottom."

"Just so. My reckonings show that in three thousand years there will be nought left of Pusaad save chains of islands, now the tops of mountains."

"What difference does it make what happens thousands of years hence?"

"TO you none, stripling, but kings must take a view that's longer than the span of their own petty lifetimes—at least if they'd rise above the level of mere crowned beasts—and it is with kings I'd deal. The Hordhun Manuscript, 'tis rumored, harbors spells of such puissance that they'll either halt or speed this continental settling. With that in my hands, see you in what an advantageous site I'd be respecting the Pusaadian kinglets?"

"I see. Do these spells really work?"

"That I know not; but even if they don't, they'll furnish a lever wherewith to pry open the bulging coffers of Lorsk and Parsk and the rest."

"Then I saddle up Dostaen to-morrow, ride to Dauskeh's cave, and out-bid our rivals when this work comes up?"

"Yes, but 'tis not quite so simple. For this auction does entail two attributes unique. First, you'll not see the faces of your fellow-bidders, because 'tis one of Dauskeh's

crotchets to make all who'd attend his auction wear masks resembling the visages of animals."

"Do I don such a mask here?" Gezun had an unpleasant mental picture of himself wearing the head of a leopard or ibex and jogging through Ezvelar on his mule, to the uproarious mirth of his fellow-striplings.

"Nay; Dauskezh will furnish them on your arrival, assigning to each the semblance of the beast his boary fancy thinks that bidder most in soul and character resembles. And that fact provides you with your only clue to the second difficulty, to wit: that neither will the items to be sold be openly displayed, but be identified by number merely."

"What japery! How shall I know the Hordhun Manuscript when 'tis offered?"

"'Tis the conceit of Dauskezh Van that a true magician can perceive without being told: and in sooth, were I there, I'd no doubt contrive to make head against his quilllets. Lacking such skills, you must devise another means. Now, there's no doubt that Nikurteu Balya, may the gods blast his leprous soul, is also bent upon procurement of this manuscript. And if you rate the wizards of Nembiar in order of intelligence, Dauskezh stands first, myself second, and Nikurteu third. It follows that of all who come in masks to this event, Nikurteu'll be the most sagacious.

Therefore you should know him by his mask, which I presume will be that of an owl since that bird is universally conceded to be the wisest of the brute kingdom. And when you perceive that he displays unwonted interest in some item, you may infer that that's the manuscript in question, and bid the limit."

"But," said Gezun Lonska, "what's to hinder this same Nikurteu from casting on me some baneful spell that shall strike me immobile or speechless till the bidding he completed?"

"Oh, a trifle, a trifle that had slipped my old mind. I'll put on you a counter-spell that should endure till your return, so that such assaults unnatural shall rebound and recoil upon the sender."

"Why not lend me the ring of star-metal?"

Gezun indicated the band of metal, like silver but duller, that encircled the finger of Sanchetb Sar. What the metal was none knew, save that it was harder than the toughest bronze, and was said to have come from a stone that fell from the sky. It was so effective as a repellent for all sorts of spells and spirits that Gezun's master had to doff it before he could undertake any magical operation himself.

"Heh-heh, and have you defy my commands with impunity, you young coystril? Not likely!"

"Huh. You care not what he-

comes of me, it seems, but only for your art. Some day I'll slay myself in sheer despite."

"Oh, come now . . . I'll tell you. You've been a good boy, though betimes exasperating; in recognition whereof I'll make you a bargain. I have another of these rings, raped from the same sky-stone, and do you procure this manuscript maugre all perils, I'll give you this spare ring to keep."

Gezun Lorska grinned under his mop of black Pusaadian curls. "I'll fetch your zany writing, Master, or perish in the trying! You'll faithfully feed my beasts whilst I'm gone?"

"Aye; though I know not why I submit to having my house turned into a menagerie. Go now, fetch our supper, for your tomorrow commences ere dawn."

GEZUN Lorska rode his mule for three days into the deep defiles and gloomy mountains of the peninsula of Gozan, with plenty of time to think.

He wondered, for instance, at his master's plan to extort treasure from the kinglets of Pusaad by means of the Hordhun Manuscript and its alleged spells. These kinglets included his own former sovereign, Vuar the Capricious of Lorsk. Now, whither lay his primary duty, towards King Vuar or towards Sancheth Sar? This was his first real chance to ponder such problems since his purchase from

the pack of Harreimorka pirates a year before. Ever since he had been kidnapped while exploring his family's estate on the supposedly safe western shores of Lorsk he had lived in too constant a ferment of sudden terrors and new experience to have time to think.

He was hazy as to what rights a slave had. If he ran away but was recaptured before leaving the confines of Nembiar, he knew he'd be forcibly returned to the custody of Sancheth Sar, minus an ear as a reminder. On the other hand if he crossed the Tritonian Sea to Pusaad he would, he thought, be safe: and once in Lorsk his family's influence could interpose an army between him and any pursuers.

Unfortunately there lay that somber sea between himself and home, and passage would not easily be arranged for a fourteen-year-old boy with a slave-brand on his hand.

And how eager was he to escape, really? To him enslavement was one of the normal risks of life, and he would no more have thought of attacking the institution as a whole merely because it had caught him in its toils than he would have thought of proposing a law against dying.

All things considered, he had gotten off rather well. Sancheth Sar had not inflicted on him any mutilation besides the pirates' brand, and had, in his erratic and absent-

mindful way, treated him kindly enough, so that Gezun had become warily fond of the old man. Or as fond as any adolescent normally becomes of an adult master. His real friends were those of his own age in Ezvelar, whom he dominated partly by a certain amiable ingenuity in plotting forays against the common enemy, the adult world; partly by the glamor of his magical apprenticeship; and partly by sheer size.

If he continued to work with reasonable fidelity for this strange master, he thought, he might even look forward to stepping into the wizard's shoes some day. Such a career might well provide more fun and glory than life as a petty lordling on the bison-swarming plains of windy Lorsk. Perhaps he could set up headquarters in lordly Torrutseish, whence Sancheth Sar had originally come. Maybe he could win a daughter of the King of Nembiar to concubine; become vizier, or even king himself . . .

Another thought made him grin: He certainly wouldn't leave Ezvelar until he had had a showdown with Djarra on that matter of completing his education.

WHEN the mountains of Gozau had grown so tall that they seemed to lean over and glower down upon him, Gezun Lorska came to Mount Tadhik and the cave of Dauskezh Van, which opened out into a natural amphitheater among

the crags. A small almost-human being came up and took Gezun's mule and led it to where other beasts of burden were tethered, then returned to Gezun. It laid a finger on its lips and led him into the mouth of the cave, picking up a small copper oil-lamp whose flame cast a meager yellow glow into the dark.

"Almost you were too late," it whispered, tugging Gezun along the rocky corridor. "Wait here."

It disappeared into a side-cave or room and came out again with a curious object: a hollow head-mask in the form of a lamb's head. Gezun Lorska remembered his master's warning about Dauskezh's custom of making the bidders don masks that symbolized their respective natures, and felt anger stir within him.

"Why you—" he began, but just then the creature popped the object over his head and tied it in place with a draw-string before he could avert the event.

Gezun's anger subsided and he allowed himself a chuckle. Let them think him a lamb; the reputation of being a simpleton might be an asset to a man—provided he were not one in fact.

Then the being led him swiftly further back into the labyrinth of caves where Dauskezh made his home. Here and there the little lamp showed where the wizard and his helpers had improved the natural formations for their own conveniences, enlarging a minor vug

to serve as a storage space or shorting up a precarious bit of cave-roof with planks and props. Then they entered a large cavern lit by several lamps, in which were gathered Gezun's fellow-bidders, seated on the swept stone floor in concentric crescents and wrapped in the black mantles of Nembiar.

As the being pushed Gezun Lorska into a vacant place in the last row, most of the heads of the earlier arrivals turned towards him, exhibiting, not human faces, but more animal-masks. Through the eye-holes in his mask he saw a horse, a lion, an aurochs, a fallow-deer, a rhinoceros, a badger—even one grotesque simulacrum in miniature of a mammoth's head, complete with curling tusks and dangling trunk.

BY the lamplight he could discern along the walls row after row of dim-lit paintings of animals, executed in a lively and life-like though archaic style. There were mammoths and bison and the giant deer now found only in savage Ierarne. This, then, must be one of the caves of which the legends of Pusaad told, where his forebears had lived scores of centuries earlier, before the gods had taught men the copper-smelting art—before the short sharp-browed Hauskirik had driven the Pusaadians across the Tritonian Sea and made all of Nembiar theirs. His people, though individually larger than the

Hauskirik by the length of a foot, had been too much absorbed in their art, their songs, their totemistic religion, and their intertribal feuds to resist these taciturn and tenacious newcomers, who swarmed in to the land like hornets, bringing a new and deadly sting: the bow and arrow.

Now the Pusaadians on their sea-girt land painted new pictures and dreamed dreams of returning to their homeland. The animals on the wall reminded Gezun that he was a Pusaadian too, and that his real name was Dopueng Shysh, not this servile cognomen his master had imposed upon him as easier for Hauskirik vocal organs to pronounce than the vowels of Pusaad. Gezun wondered whether he could, by taking Sancheth Sar's place and becoming the greatest wizard in Nembiar, expedite this homecoming before all of Pusaad sank beneath the Western Sea.

But right now he had to pick Nikurteu Balya out of the crowd without a face to go by. Sancheth Sar had hinted that Nikurteu, for sagacity, might be honored with an owl's head. Gezun, however, knew a lot about animals. He had kept as a pet practically everything short of a bison, both home in Pusaad and here in Nembiar, and had given Sancheth Sar a terrific turn by producing a pair of snakes at supper. Unknown on Pusaad, these reptiles had fascinated Gezun's artistic eye by their grace, and for-

tunately they were not of a venomous species.

Gezun Lorska knew that the owl, for all its sage appearance, was no more intelligent than any other bird—if anything rather less so.

He peered through the crowd, picking out a leopard, a hyena, a bear, a wolverine, a wild ass, and a monkey. He had also had to do with monkeys, and knew something of their trickiness and resource. It seemed to him that if Dauskezh Van were as wise as he was alleged to be, and were going to choose an animal to symbolize the character of Nikurten, he could hardly select a more suitable symbol than the monkey.

Well, he'd be taking a chance either way, so he might as well take it his way as another's. The ape it should be.

Leather curtains rustled and Dauskezh Van came in. He was even older than Sancheth Sar, and in the dim light he seemed to Gezun to be already dead and reanimated by some not altogether successful witchery.

"Bids on One," whispered Dauskezh Van.

"Fourteen nasses of gold," responded a wizard with the head of a chamois.

"Fifteen," said a beaver.

"Sixteen," said the owl.

and began bidding against him. He restrained himself, bearing in mind that he had reached his decision dispassionately, uninfluenced by the excitement of the moment, and had better stick to it.

Item Number One went to the Chamois and Two came up. It was a very dull business, and Gezun Lorska almost fell asleep when a bid on Number Twenty-Three from the direction of the monkey brought him sharply out of his doze.

"Twelve nasses," said the monkey.

"Fifteen," said Gezun, heart pounding.

"Twenty."

"Twenty-five," said Gezun, thankful now that Sancheth Sar had forced him to learn simple sums.

They went on up in jumps of five until they neared fifty, Sancheth Sar's limit. It was a formidable price; not only for Sancheth, but also, apparently, for his rival, for the monkeyhead began slowing down as they neared it.

"Forty-eight," said the monkey.

"Forty-nine," said Gezun.

"Forty-nine and a half."

"Fifty."

Now Gezun waited, feeling as though his heart would burst through his chest. All the monkey had to do was add another fraction of a nas, no matter how small, and take the Item . . .

"Sold!" croaked Dauskezh Van.

"Item Number Twenty-four . . ."

Gezun relaxed, letting his breath

GEZUN Lorska felt an urge to jump to the conclusion that the owl was Nikurten Balya after all,

out—then caught it again as another fear-fingered his windpipe. Suppose he had been mistaken and the ape was not Nikurteu after all? Or suppose Number Twenty-three were not the Hordhun Manuscript?

It would all come out in due time. If he had gone astray he could at best expect a beating from Sancheth Sar—not that he held Sancheth's beatings in much awe, for the old wizard no longer had the strength even to raise a welt on Gezun's tough hide. More serious was the prospect of having Sancheth cast upon him some bothersome curse, like muteness or inability to touch water—but then, he now carried a protective spell from Sancheth himself, and by the time it wore off, the sorcerer would have slithered down and forgotten his costly error.

Item Thirty proved the last of the lot. The near-human thing touched Gezun Lorska and beckoned while the others kept their places. Gezun inferred that under Dauskezh's quaint rules the bidders were allowed to depart at intervals only, so as not to see each other's faces. He, being the last to arrive, would go first.

So it proved. The being stopped Gezun at the anteroom, took the lamb's head from him, and handed him a cylindrical package wrapped in lambskin and tied with a string of esparto grass. In return Gezun handed over the entire contents of the bag of gold weights

which Sancheth Sar had sent with him. The being weighed the gold with care before letting Gezun go.

Once free, Gezun Lorska wasted no time but rode off on Dostaen at once, chewing a great chunk of barley-bread from his scrip.

THE sun was sending a last red ray through a notch in the mountains of Gozau, and Gezun Lorska was lolling on his mule and humming a song of Pusaad, when two men sprang out from behind the rocks. One, who carried a big bronze sword, seized Dostaen's bridle; the other made at Gezun Lorska with a hunting-spear.

As the man with the spear drew it back for a stab, Gezun tumbled off his mule's back, so that the bronze spearhead darted like a snake's tongue through the empty space where Gezun had just been. He scrambled to his feet on the leeward side of the mule and made off up the nearest slope as fast as he could.

Gezun Lorska's ear caught a fragment of speech between the men: something like ". . . you hold the mule whilst I . . ." A glance showed the spearman coming after him, bounding with great leaps from rock to rock, his black cloak flapping like bat's wings. Though more agile than the man, Gezun had a horrid feeling that the fellow would run him down in the long run. And he had nothing but a modest bronze knife to fight with.

He ran on anyway. The slope narrowed to a tongue of land as Gezun neared the end of the summit of a small hill which on the far side dropped away in sheer precipices. A quick look showed no way down on that side. He was cornered.

The panting breath of the pursuer came louder and louder to Gezun's ears; any second the man would appear. The knife would be of little use. So would his sandals. His only other possessions at the moment were the Hordhun Manuscript (if such it was), his kilt, and the broad leather belt that held the kilt in place. His cloak he had shed at the start of the chase. The bronze huckle on the end of the belt might prove useful . . .

A jumble of rocks lay about the hilltop; one nearly the size of his head and of curious elongated shape, like an enlarged fingerbone. Gezun whipped off his belt, letting his kilt fall; made a loop of his belt, and slipped the loop over the narrow place in the middle of the stone.

When the spearman topped the rise, Gezun rushed at him, screeching in hope of disconcerting him. First he threw the rolled-up kilt at the man's face. The man dodged, but his attention was distracted long enough for Gezun to step in close, whirling the stone around his head on the end of the belt-loop. The spearman was scarcely taller than he was, and the slope gave

Gezun some slight advantage.

THE stone struck the side of the man's head with a solid sound of crunching bone, and the man fell sidewise across his dropped spear. Gezun made sure the fellow was dead by severing his head, then pondered. He could not press his luck too far. The other man, he was sure, would recognize him the minute he appeared, and would be ready to meet him with sword and rolled-up cloak. Craft was indicated.

Gezun Lorska therefore donned the dead man's clothes, pulling the black mantle over his head as these Hauskirik did at night. Then, picking up the spear, he swaggered back down the slope. The sun had disappeared.

The swordsman, still holding the mule, looked up as Gezun approached and said: "Did you get it?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Gezun, striving to imitate with his changing voice the deeper accents of his victim. When he was close he said:

"Take it."

But as the swordsman tucked his sword under his left arm and put out his right hand, what Gezun laid on the hand was not the Hordhun Manuscript, but the freshly-severed head of the spearman, which he had been carrying under the cloak.

The swordsman gave a cry of horror and dropped the head with a thud. Gezun Lorska whipped up the spear and plunged the point in-

to his foe's thick body. When his young muscles failed to drive it very far in on the first thrust, he shoved on the shaft with all his might, pushing the man back from him.

The man dropped his sword with a clatter and tried to recover it, but another push by Gezun forced him off-balance and he fell. He tried to wrestle the spear-shaft out of his body, but Gezun kept pushing it in; then to reach Gezun, who was now at the far end of the spear and beyond reach. At last the man threw himself away from Gezun, tearing the spear-shaft out of his grasp.

Gezun danced back as the man rounded on him and pulled the spear out of his side, hobbled back to where he had dropped his sword, picked it up too, and set out after Gezun with a weapon in each hand. Gezun ran—not uphill this time, but down. Behind him the man plowed through the scrub and scrambled over the rocks, cursing by his various gods in a gasping undertone.

The chase went on until Gezun realized that the gasping breath and the muttered curses were no longer keeping up with him. He looked back and saw a dark shape sprawled on the hillside among the boulders.

He scouted cautiously towards it. The man was lying and holding his side, but as Gezun approached he sat up and hurled the spear at him. It was a bad throw, for the spear

slewed sidewise in the air and the shaft hit Gezun on the forearm he threw up to ward it off—a bruising knock but not crippling. Gezun Lorska picked up the spear and backed as the man tried to rush with his sword. Lacking the strength to make it, the fellow sank down again among the rocks.

GEZUN Lorska sat down on a boulder and waited warily for the man to weaken further. Darkness deepened; the evening star appeared. The gasping breath became a rattle and then stopped. Gezun rose, bounded around behind the man, and drove the spear into his back to make sure he was dead. He looted the corpse with quick efficiency and found his way back up to the road, where Dostaen placidly munched the scanty herbage.

A few minutes later, wearing his own clothes and carrying the Hordhun Manuscript and the weapons of his late attackers, he set out again on the way to Ezvelar.

"Gezun! Gezun Lorska!" cried a voice.

Gezun recognized it. "Djarra!" he shouted. "What on earth are you doing here?" In his excitement his voice slid up into the high hoy's range.

She hopped down to the road and caught his leg. "Oh, right joyful am I that you came! My father brought me on a trading-trip adown Gozau, and a pack of knaves set upon us and scattered the caravan,

though I think my father got away safe. Will you take me back to Ezvelar?"

"Certes! What think you? Here, catch my hand and hop up behind."

"Won't you dismount a minute first? So weary am I of wandering these forsaken hills, and you can't go much further tonight in any case."

"I'll go far enough to put a healthy distance betwixt me and the ghosts of those I sped!"

"You've been manslaying again?"

"Merely in self-defense. There were six, but I drove Dostaen at full gallop into the ruck, slew two at the first onset and put the rest to rout."

"Marvelous! You shall tell me all about it; but meanwhile dismount. Have you aught to eat? So weak of starvation am I that without a bite I fear I can go no further."

"Oh, very well." Gezun vaulted off. "But for all these things there is a price, as says the philosopher Golshek."

LAUGHING she put her face up to be kissed. Although the light was too dim to discern her features clearly, her Hauskirik eyebrows, like a pair of little black sickles, showed against the lighter tone of her skin. She melted into his arms and he felt her ripening young body against his. He kissed her frantically, his pulse pounding.

"There's a place—nearby—" she gasped, "where—your education

might—"

Somewhere an owl hooted. The sound touched off a train of thought in Gezun Lorska's mind, even while he was kissing Djarra. The owl is really a stupid creature, he remembered, for all his appearance of wisdom; and was he playing the owl by any chance?

It was odd that when he had seen Djarra four days ago she had said nothing of any such trip; it was odder that Djarra's father, a patriarch with strong ideas of the place of women in society, should take his daughter with him on such a commercial foray. Perhaps it was more than a coincidence that the type of education which Djarra proposed to give him was precisely that guaranteed to dissolve and cancel the spell Sancheth Sar had cast upon him to ward off the maleficent magic of Nikurteu Balya.

As he hesitated, torn between prudence and passion, the owl hooted again. With that he thrust her to arms' length, looking at her through narrowed eyes.

"What's the name of my mother?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why Gezun, as if I should know that . . ."

"Then be damned to demon-land!" he shouted, vaulting back on the mule. "May all your brats be stillborn! May Dyosizh smite your tenderest parts with an itch! May the teeth rot in your head!"

He trotted off into the night,

knowing full well that the real Djarra knew the names of his parents perfectly well. Hadn't he spent hours telling her of his life in Lorsk?

A glance back showed Djarra standing quietly by the road. As he watched, her features changed into something not quite human, and peals of shrill aged laughter came after him. He spat and wiped his mouth with his mantle.

"Thinks he can befool me with his shape-changing sprites, eh?" he mused. "Me, me? Dopueng Shysh of Lorsk, the future king of Nemblar?"

He gestured with the spear against the unresisting night air.

THE heart of Gezun Lorska beat high as he rode into Ezvelar in the early morning. At the edge of town he dismounted to lead Dostaen the rest of the way, for the narrow streets did not encourage cantering, and anyway Gezun's bottom was sore from days of hard riding. He paused at the little bridge over the Arrang to watch a gang of workmen digging a foundation for a house. He became lost in contemplation, thinking of the fine palace he'd build when he was king, until a voice behind him roused him:

"Day-dreaming, Gezun Lorska? You'll never attain the style of magician by that road!"

It was Nikurten Balya, riding past on his fine black horse. With

a laugh Gezun's master's rival rode on and disappeared.

Gezun Lorska pulled himself together and trudged the small remaining distance to Sancheth Sar's house. Sancheth Sar himself hurried to the door at the sound of his approach.

"What news?" creaked the old wizard.

"Success, Master!"

"*Hendae!* Glorious! You're a fine lad, as I've always said!" Years fell away from Sancheth as he waved his stick, did a little dance-step, and thumped Gezun affectionately on the back. "Tell me all about it."

"Here's the manuscript," said Gezun, handing it over. "But before I begin, wasn't there a certain other bargain between us?"

"You mean the ring? Here, take mine; I'll use the other."

Sancheth Sar slipped the ring of sky-metal off and handed it to Gezun, who experimented till he found a finger it fitted comfortably.

"And now to your tale—wup! What's this?"

As Gezun Lorska watched with increasing alarm, Sancheth Sar's eyes widened, the corners of his mouth turned down, and his fingers began to shake.

"Listen," he said in a voice like one of Gezun's pet snakes in a rage:

"To my esteemed colleague, Sancheth Sar, from his admirer Nikurten Balya. Your servant bore himself nobly on the mission whereon you sent him. Nevertheless it is

written in the Book of Geratun that he who assigns to a boy a task properly appertaining to a man shall rue the day he did so. For Gezun Lorska shrewdly surmised which item of the auction was the Hordhun Manuscript and overbid me; he bravely fought and slew two servants I sent to waylay him; he resisted with inhuman self-control the advances of a sprite I sent to entice him from the path of rectitude in the form of his sweetling. Yet when he entered Ezvelar did he stop to watch four men digging a hole in the ground—four men whom I, knowing that no boy can resist the spectacle of an excavation, had hired for the purpose. And so bemused became he that it was no tough task to take the Hordhun Manuscript from his scrip and substitute this commiseratory screed. Farewell!"

"You!" screamed Sancheth Sar, and his eyes were like those of a

hungry eagle. "You bawling oaf! You imperceiverant hilding! You incondite loon! I'll cast upon you an itch that shall leave you no peace for—"

"Forget not this, Master!" cried Gezun Lorska, hacking toward the door and holding out the clenched hand that bore the ring of star-metal. "Enchant me you cannot!"

"But that protects you not from more mundane chastisement!" yelled Sancheth, and went for Gezun Lorska with his stick.

And thus it came to pass that the citizens of Ezvelar were treated to the diverting if not uplifting spectacle of Gezun Lorska running full-tilt down the main street, while behind him came the town's senior sorcerer, Sancheth Sar, making a speed that none would have expected in a wizard of his centuries, and cleaving the air with his mystic walking-stick.

THE END

Oceans Of Space

THE handwriting is on the wall; it's clear and legible for anyone to see. Man is going out into space, to the farthest planets, into the trackless wastes of emptiness—and he's going to make his mark. We're on the verge of this, it's true, and though it will be a long time before it happens—in every way we're preparing.

Offhand you wouldn't think there'd be any connection between sea-going light ships — and inter-

planetary space—but there is. It just requires a slight extension of the mind.

The other day it was announced that the Coast Guard is experimenting with a number of completely remotely controlled light ships, these vessels carrying radio beacons and light signals which guard the entrances to ports and prevent ocean-going ships from cracking up on the shoals. These ships are simply metal shells filled with electro-mechan-

local equipment ranging from three automatic diesel engines to complete transmitters. Once every few months they will be refueled by tenders, their apparatus checked, and their seaworthiness established—just as is done with the smaller automatic buoys.

This is, in its way, a direct preparation for the future. Inevitably radio and light and radar beacons are going to be required in the remote fastnesses of interplanetary space. Automatic signal generating equipment will be required to maintain a constant vigil, to provide a "spacemark" for traveling spaceships. Certainly these space stations

will be a far cry in their mechanical and electrical natures from the preceding lightships. But essentially, as in all scientific devices the principles and techniques will be about the same.

An automatic radio in space won't be much different from the same thing on the ocean. Sure, the power plants won't be diesel engines, but there will be power plants!

The overall effect of this activity is this; we are preparing for the future whether we know it or not. Every single advancement that occurs here on Earth will eventually find its counterpart in space.

* * *

Kobald Capers

FAMILIAR in legend, story and song to French and Swiss metal and coal miners, are the mischievous "Kobalds"—"dwarfs" to us and inspired stimulation to Walt Disney in his famous roly-poly little elves of "The Story of Snow-White . . ."

The original "kobalds" of the mining legends were the personification of the miners' troubles. If a mine caved in, the kobalds had caused it. If a miner hurt himself, it was because of the kobalds, and if a miner vanished in the labyrinth, stygian depth of the mine fastnesses, it was the kobalds who had stolen him. In essence the kobalds were the simple miners' expression in speech of the woes associated with that dangerous work.

But so fascinating were the tales told of the kobalds that gradually their fame branched out to the storytellers who changed them into more benevolent creatures. The name kobald is the origin incidentally of

the word "cobalt"—color and metal.

One of the most famous of the kobald legends tells of Miner ("Bergwerker" in Swiss) Mueller, who, in a fit of rage when a lump of ore dropped from the roof of a mine and struck him on the head, cursed the kobalds and all their descendants. His curse was overheard by the kobalds and Miner Mueller suddenly disappeared from the ken of his fellows. Miner Mueller had lost his way in a gallery and had starved to death explained the mine foreman when they came upon a heap of bones years later. But the miners themselves knew better. The kobalds, they said, in revenge for Mueller's curses, had removed his soul and body from around his skeleton and condemned him to wander in and out of mines forever, always walling and weeping in weird tones. To this day they say in the mines, when the creaks and whispers and moans and sighs are heard, "Miner Mueller is walking today . . ."



Illustrated by Ramon Raymond

PLAYMATE

By Leslie A. Crounch

Dickie was a swell playmate. But there was something unusual about him — like the way he needed oil sometimes — and pounded nails with his fists . . .

I was in the kitchen hunting for matches to light my pipe when Bobby came bouncing through the door, letting the screen shut with a shattering bang. Without seeming to even pause in his rush he got out all in one long breath: "Hey, Mom, can I have Dickie for supper tonight?"

Betts paused at her task of trimming a pie before popping it in the oven.

"Who's Dickie, dear?" she asked.

Bobby snuffled, slyly helping himself to a cookie. "He's the new boy who moved in next door, Mom."

"Is he a nice little boy?"

I snorted a bit to myself at this. I don't cross Betts; it doesn't complement the happiness and tranquility of a home to tell a woman how to raise your son. You just let 'em go their own way, and watch the offspring go his.

"Sure he's a nice boy." I sensed the disdain in his voice.

"What's he like, son?" I asked.

"Oh—I dunno—he's well, he's jus' different."

We let it go at that. Betts would have carried the matter further, but, catching her eye, I shook my head. She desisted, smiling a little.

* * *

It was comfortable on the veranda. There was a little breeze blowing and I was sitting there, feet cocked up on the rail, half asleep. Betts came out and picked up a magazine. Only the slight sound of her flipping the pages disturbed the tranquility of a hot summer afternoon.

"Hey, Mom! Where's the oil can?"

Our small son came tearing around the side of the house, yelling his request in that impatient tone all small boys seem to have some sort of a proprietary interest in. He mounted the steps and asked again before we had had a chance to answer.

"I think there's one in the cupboard under the kitchen sink," I supplied the information.

"Gotta be thin oil," he stipulated.

I grinned. "Three-in-one there. That thin enough?"

He rumbled his hair with a grimy hand. "I guess so. Dickie needs it."

Betts smiled. "What does Dickie need it for, dear?" she asked.

"Don't call me 'dear'!" he scowled. "That's baby talk."

"I'm sorry." She sounded hurt. "What do you need the oil for, Robbie?"

His voice came back to us as he vanished into the house.

"It's for Dickie. *He squeaks!*"

I frowned about the garage. I'd got tired of sitting about, doing nothing, so I'd wandered down here to the combined garage and work shop, thinking maybe there might be something I could patter a little time away on.

It was pretty messy. Various items that collect about any home, no matter how well managed, had collected in a hodgepodge that was without rhyme or reason. I thought I might tidy up a little.

I was well into things, shirt sleeves rolled up, when I heard voices. Unconsciously, as one will do when busy, I listened. It was Bobby, and apparently he had brought the other boy with him.

"Pop's got a bench back here. We can fix you there, maybe," I heard him say.

I grinned, thinking how funny the ungrammatical speech errors of small children are at times. I won-

dered, briefly, what might be broken that needed fixing.

I had hung up a basket, and was bending down for a rake when a definite denial from the direction of the bench broke in on my wandering thoughts.

"Heck, no," I heard this new voice exclaim. "Not that one. It's too large."

"No it ain't," Bobby's voice replied.

"It is, too. It'll stick way out and get in the way."

"Pop uses bolts too long. He cuts 'em off and polishes the end."

"Well — maybe — all right. Be careful though. I won't be able to pick anything up if it isn't just right."

Then I heard the various tiny clickings denoting tools in use, to be followed by the thin rasp of a hacksaw.

Not believing in interfering with the activities of boys at play, I went on with my work, and quickly forgot the incident.

THE roast certainly smelled good. But then, Betts is a wonderful cook. She teases me sometimes about that being the only reason I married her.

I helped her bring it in; she carried the platter, and I carried the carving utensils.

"Where's Bobby?" she asked, setting it down.

"Oh, somewhere about. Down in

the basement, I think."

"Will you call him, dear?"

I did this and I could hear his footsteps and those of his new friend, clattering up the stairs. The faucet went on splatteringly.

"Get another towel, Bobby," Betts called.

"Phooey!" Bobby answered. "Only need one. Dickie doesn't wash!"

I almost laughed at the horrified look on my wife's face. I turned to the window, thrusting hands into pockets. Cleanliness is almost a fetish with her and I knew how Bobby's remark must have needled her. She marched, that is the only word, toward the kitchen.

"Oh dear," I heard, a second later.

When I turned, she was standing behind her chair at the table, a funny look on her face. It wasn't a frightened one. It was sort of, well, amazed, dumfounded, perhaps. I couldn't place it, and I can't yet when I think back. She looked at me, and gave the queerest little shrug, helpless like.

Then Bobby and his friend came in.

We all sat down and I had carved the roast and was passing the plates around before I got a chance to look at the new boy closely. I'd thought there was something a little out of the ordinary about him when he had come in. His walk had been rather stiff, as though his knees wouldn't bend properly.

When I saw his face I was astounded. Never had I seen one like it before.

It had human lines, yes. The texture of the skin, if skin it was, appeared normal, outside of a certain hard appearance, a harshness, that was altogether alien. That is the only term I can use—alien. The mouth opened, but it wasn't pliable like a human mouth. It was supposed to be that, I know, but it still was something else.

I watched him as we ate. He drank his milk as Bobby did, only differently. That is, he didn't seem to swallow it, he just appeared to pour it down. He'd place the glass to his lips, tip it, and the fluid would pour down, steadily, quickly, and the whole glassful would disappear in one smooth flow, without halt or apparent discomfort.

Exactly as though he didn't have to swallow, but just poured it straight down, I thought to myself. As though he had no gullet!

And the way he ate. This was something even stranger. He didn't place the food in his mouth and chew it, with pauses now and then. He fed himself like an automaton. Each piece was cut from the meat, each forkful of potatoes, each bite of bread, was an evenly spaced motion as though controlled by a mechanism. Each portion was of the same size. And this went on until his plate was empty, without the slightest sign of hesitation, except to take another glass of milk,

which was poured down the same way as the first.

HE didn't chew his food, either, as far as I could see. I know it must sound as though I am a very imperfect host, to watch a guest in such a fashion. But I think that if you were in the same position, you would have done the same. As I have said, he didn't appear to chew his food. His mouth would open, receive the portion brought up by his fork, close—and that was all. Absolutely no motion of working jaws; no sign of swallowing.

When the main courses were finished, we had ice cream, a favorite of Bobby's. This is something I have to eat with some circumspection, as it bothers my teeth at times. Betts can eat it without a thought in the world. But she still doesn't take it the way Dickie did. He shovelled it in the way I'd stoke my furnace on a cold night. I could picture the inside of his mouth becoming iced up and needing some sort of defrosting. But it didn't seem to bother him a bit. He held out his plate for a second helping, which went the same way as its predecessor.

Finally the meal was over. Bobby, as is his want, was impatient to get away. His friend seemed just as eager. As they left the room I again noted the stiff, rather awkward, yet albeit, somehow graceful, stride of his.

I looked at Betts. She was staring at me with eyes big and round.

"What's the matter, dear?" I asked.

"That boy, Al. He isn't normal."

That was an understatement, I told her.

"Oh, I know what you mean. The way he eats. But that isn't all."

I lifted my eyebrows.

"When I went to the kitchen to see about him not washing, what do you think I saw?"

I stuffed my pipe and eyed the bowl appreciatively.

"I saw him oiling himself!"

I lit up. The pipe drew swell. After a full meal, the good rich tobacco tasted wonderful.

"Al, did you hear me? I said he was oiling himself!"

"Oh sure, he was oiling himself. What's wrong with that?"

I got up, pushing the chair back with a muted rasp. I stretched. Feeling like a short slesta, I started for the front porch. Then it was that the intelligence of her words struck me. I did a quick double-take.

"He was doing—WHAT?"

She smiled, smugly. "Oiling himself, Al."

I leaned on the table. "Easy now, Betts, old girl. Easy now. Maybe you ate too much—maybe the heat—"

"Heat nothing. He was leaning against the table and he had a can

of oil and he was squirting it in his hands and rubbing it on his neck and wrists."

I sat down. Looking at her, I wondered.

"No, I'm not crazy," she said. "And I'm not cracking up. I'm just telling you what I saw."

I thought it over. I was pretty sure she was mistaken. She had seen something, but to her it had looked entirely different. Betts is a highly imaginative person, what with reading those science fiction magazines and stuff. But I looked at her closely, as it still didn't sound like her.

I rose. "C'mon. We'll look up Dickie and get to the bottom of this."

THEY were building something in the back yard. It looked like a house, or maybe it was supposed to be a boat. They had two or three old piano crates, and with some scrap lumber from the loft over the garage, were nailing it all together.

Bobby was busily hanging away with a hammer. I imagined the nails he was using, with his habit of using ten where one or two would do. I could hear his friend hammering away on the other side, out of sight.

"How ya doin', Dickie?" Bobby yelled as we came up.

"Fine," Dickie replied.

"Ya usin' the hammer?"

"Nope. Do it faster without."

"Don't it hurt your hand?"

"Naw!"

"I wish I could drive nails with my hand."

"It's easy. Ya just double up your fist and give the nail a whack on the head—"

We didn't hear the rest. We moved around the packing cases and stared.

Dickie was standing there, nails sticking out of his mouth. He'd take one in his left hand, hold it to the wood, and bang! bring his fist down on it and drive it home. No hammer—no nothing. Just his bare hand, doubled into a fist, and he was driving those nails home with the regularity of a slow trip-hammer.

Betts, fainting, knocked the pipe from my mouth. I carried her into the house and started fussing over her.

* * *

After she had recovered, we held a consultation. Then we went over to our new neighbor and rapped on the door. When it opened we faced, not some strange creature, as I think we half expected, but a perfectly normal woman, somewhat harrassed looking, wiping her hands on a flowered apron.

"I'm Al Hason," I introduced myself. "We live next door—"

"Oh!" She seemed to be expecting us, by the look on her face. "Please come in."

She ushered us into a nicely furnished parlor and called to someone named John. Her husband, I suspected.

"This is Mr. Robeson," she introduced us. To her husband: "They live next door."

He drew in his breath and lines of weariness grew about his mouth.

"We've been sort of expecting you," he said, sitting down. "But not so soon."

My eyebrows raised.

"I guess," he patted his wife's hand where it rested on his shoulder. "I guess you've met our son."

"Yes," Betts answered. "Our little boy had him at our place for supper."

Mrs. Robeson sat down and started to wring her hands.

"Oh dear. So now you know! We have had to move so often—people just can't understand."

I started feeling uncomfortable. I ran my finger around inside my collar and wished we had left well enough alone.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Betts said. "But really, he seems such a nice boy. He is so quiet and well-mannered. We—er—" she stumbled.

"Yes, I know just what you mean, Mrs. Hason." Robeson rose to his feet, started pacing up and down the small room. "You can imagine what we feel like, living with him for almost seven years. We know even less about him than you do."

"Perhaps a doctor—" I muttered and was sorry immediately. He heard me.

"A doctor?" He smiled slightly. "I had the same idea a long time ago. We took him to the best and found out nothing. After looking him over for a time, they wanted to put him on display before other men of science. They wanted to experiment on him. We couldn't allow that. After all, he is our son."

I agreed, mentally, and verbally.

"He was born to us in a normal way, as far as we know, and as far as the records show," Mrs. Robeson took up. "He seems to grow but from what we were told, we cannot understand how. Nothing seems to hurt him. He never gets cut, or has slivers, or gets colds. He's never been ill, and he eats anything he desires."

Robeson laughed, somewhat bitterly, I thought. "Don't forget the oil, my dear."

She smiled. "Oh yes, the oil. I forgot—if he doesn't oil himself quite frequently, especially during wet weather, he stiffens up so he can hardly move. He doesn't require as much as he used to, though."

"No, not since he started eating more fats and oily foods," her husband added.

"What did the doctor say?" I asked.

"Oh, they used a lot of long words that meant nothing to us. What it all boiled down to, was

that they didn't know either. We were as much in the dark after leaving as we had been before."

"But haven't you any kind of an idea of what he might—er—be, or what might be the matter with him?"

He shook his head. "There is nothing wrong with him, Mr. Hason. He is just too perfect. Consider that he has never been ill. He never has a cold, or has any pains. He apparently can't be easily hurt. He can't be shocked, I know that. I've seen him do things around electricity that would kill an ordinary man. He doesn't even seem to feel the juice. If he does, he doesn't let on. He is strong. His flesh seems too hard to give. Why, I've seen him drive nails with his fists. He is smart. He's a regular prodigy. So you tell me what is wrong with him!"

I didn't answer that. There wasn't any need. Any remark I might have made would have been superfluous to say the least.

"Did you ever try other doctors?" I suggested.

"No, and I'm not going to. And why? Because they'll be the same as the first. They wanted to x-ray him, stick needles in him, even operate on him. I don't want that. After all, queer as he might be, he *is* our son. We can never have any more children, so he's all we got, and by God man, for better or worse, I'm going to keep him!

"What will those men do? Put him on display like a freak, maybe. Take him all over for people to stare at. I won't have it. It wouldn't be fair to him. Maybe he is a genius. If he is they'll burn his brain out with questions and he'd be just another dumb guy like his old man. No sir, I'm going to give him his chance to grow up and then maybe he'll amount to something."

He stopped. Running his fingers through his hair, he suddenly smiled.

"I'm sorry. Guess you think I'm a little nuts. But we've had to move a lot of times just because people got nosy and started saying things. It gets under a man's skin after awhile."

I figured it was time we were leaving and I suggested it to Betts, tactfully.

"Don't worry about it," I said as I shook hands with him at the door. "We won't say anything. We have a son, too, you know, so we understand. Our boy seems to like him, and that's enough for us."

THAT night, before retiring, Betts and I went in to say goodnight to Bobby, as was our rule. He was sitting up, looking out of the window at the moon, which, big and silvery, was just coming up out of the east.

He turned as we entered.

"What are you thinking about, son?" I asked, mussing his hair.

Kids have the funniest, and sometimes the most astute, philosophies, and I never tire of hearing them.

"I was just thinkin' 'bout Dickie, Pop."

"And what about Dickie?" Betts asked.

He looked at us, his eyes big, his face a little sad.

"I was thinkin' how Dickie was so lucky. He can't ever get hurt, or be sick, 'n' he told me today he won't die for hunnerds 'n' hunnerds of years 'cause he's not like us. He's got no tonsils to get sore and have to be cut out, 'n' his teeth won't ever get bad, 'n' he knows millions and millions of things I don't know. Oh, he's awful lucky 'n' awful smart, Pop. I wisht I was like him."

I looked at Betts.

"What is he like, Bobby?" I asked him.

He looked thoughtful. "I guess I can tell you," he said. "He asked me not to tell people but I guess it's all right to tell you 'n' Mom. It is all right, ain't it, Pop?"

"If you think it is, son," I said. "If you say it's all right, then it's all right."

He thought this over. His fingers picked at the bed clothes. Finally he sighed.

"Well," he began, "Dickie hasn't got insides like us, Pop. He's different. He says he's got wires 'n' glass things 'n'—'n' water only it ain't water—'n' it's all kinds of colors 'stead of blood. He don't have to eat but he says he likes to

'cause he likes the taste of things."

I felt Betts' hand close over mine and grip tight. Was this another childish game, another bit of make-believe?

"Dickie says he can tell only some kinds of kids 'bout him, 'cause he says mos' kids are like grown ups: they won't believe, 'n' they would only think he was crazy 'n' try to shut him up. But he says some kids are different 'n' those he can tell. He says when they grow up they will be his friends 'n' then he won't be alone 'n' he can do things for people with their help."

"Are there others like—well, like Dickie?" I heard Betts ask.

"Oh yes, Dickie says there are lots more. He says he knows ten right in this city."

"How did he meet them?" I asked.

"He didn't meet them!" was the somewhat surprising response. "Dickie doesn't have to meet them. He says he jus' thinks—'n' one of them thinks back at him 'n' they talk—inside here," he touched his forehead. "He says when he gets bigger 'n' stronger he can think longer 'n' meet more like him. But he says he knows there are lots more like him 'cause sometimes he dreams 'bout them."

He lay down. Facing the moon, he said, "I wish I was like Dickie, 'cause then I could do all kinds of wonderful things. Dickie says when he gets big he will rule the world

'n' he 'n' his people will not let there be any more war or let people kill each other or be bad. Gee, pop, why can't I be like him?"

His eyes closed. We waited for a few moments, then left the room and closed the door softly behind us.

In the hall we stood silently, looking at each other.

"What do you think, Al?" Betts asked.

"I don't know, Betts. If it's all made up then the answer is simple. If he's right, then, somewhere, a new race is springing up. What is creating it I don't know, and whether it is good or bad is equally

uncertain."

She sighed. "I prefer to think it's just a game he is playing."

. . . But as I lay in bed that night I wondered. And in the many nights since then I've begun to worry. It's not that I'm afraid, or maybe I am. I don't know. It's the uncertainty. The dread of something you cannot understand—something you know you are powerless to stop.

You see, the neighbor boy continues to play with Bobby. And just the other day I saw them by the garage. They were building something. And Bobby was pounding the nails in with his fist . . .

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR *Geoff St. Reynard*

(Concluded from Page 2)

background is thusly: early years, Oz and Dr. Dolittle; later, Burroughs, Wells, Claudy; then Blackwood, James, Rohmer, Mundy, etc.; while in college. Unknown. FA (from the first issue), and all the other mags in the field. I now have nearly 1000 books of flstf in my library and am obnoxiously proud of 'em.

How do I write? With music always—chanties for sea stories, Wagner for battle scenes, Auber and Rossini for the short novel in this issue, Can't write twenty words without a pipe in my teeth either (four so far on this blasted thing).

Why do I write? Because in all

this world I've found nothing that's quite so much fun. Besides, I'm my own boss. Nobody tells me what to do (except Hamling) and if I want a day off, I can take it. I can also starve, but who cares?

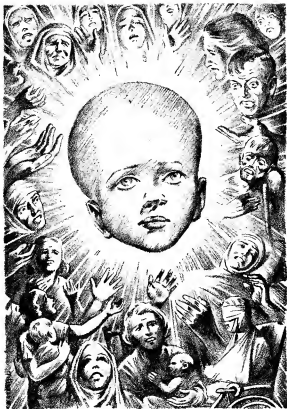
. . . me.

Assets, one wife. Liabilities, one case of spring fever that's active from January through December. Ambition, to amuse and divert the readers of Madge for a long time to come.

But never, please, never with another autobiography!

Geoff (Robert W. Krepps)
St. Reynard

* * *



Illustrated by Joe W. Tillotson

THE GIFT

By Melvin Stargis

As a boy, Carl Sloan began to perform miracles, healing the sick. But the world hated him—for being born a thousand years too soon . . .

THE tenseness in the tiny court room was a live thing that you could feel clear down to your insoles. The thick silence was broken as the judge said solemnly: "Your objection will be taken under advisement by the court, Counselor. In what manner will the childhood of the defendant be relevant to this case, Mr. Prosecutor?"

"It is my purpose to show, your Honor, that the defendant has been of unsound mind since birth, and therefore has long been a public menace, not merely a victim of circumstance as the defense would have us believe." The prosecuting attorney nodded briefly in the direction of the table for the defense.

"Objection overruled," the judge said. "You may call your witness."

"Thank you, your Honor." The prosecutor helped the slight woman into the witness box.

"Will you please give the court your name?"

The woman simpered. "Ida Mae Holk, Mrs. Ida Mae Holk."

The prosecutor cleared his throat and ruffled the papers in his hand.

"How long have you known the

defendant, Mrs. Holk?"

"Why, ever since he was about two years old. Him and his Ma came to Elmwood right after his Pa was killed in that big Oak Ridge explosion. He was born right there on the government project, you know. Never could understand why Mrs. Sloan, that was his Ma, never did get married again, her being so pretty and all, and any number of nice widowers just—"

"Uh, yes, Mrs. Holk," the prosecutor interrupted. "Was your acquaintance with the defendant continuous throughout his childhood?"

"Well, it was until he was ten years old. They sent him away to that crazy house then."

"I object to the term 'crazy house', your Honor," the public defender addressed the court.

"I am sure that the witness meant to say the Rochelle School for Retarded Children," the prosecutor said mildly. "Didn't you, Mrs. Holk?"

"Well, I guess that is what they call it," she said grudgingly. "Anyway, they kept him there until he was eighteen. Then he came back

to Elmwood and I've known him ever since."

"As a child, was the defendant er, ah, strange; that is, different from the other children?"

"He certainly was." The woman drew herself up primly. "Why, the first time that I ever laid eyes on that boy I said to my neighbor 'did you ever see a child with such a big head and such brooding eyes', why—"

The public defender started to rise.

"I don't mean physical characteristics, Mrs. Holk," the prosecutor hurriedly interjected. "The court is interested only in facts that will prove relevant to the case at hand."

"Oh." Mrs. Holk seemed disappointed. "Well, he never played much with the other children because they made so much fun of him. Not that they didn't have a right to, the way he was always acting. Picking up stray dogs and cats, and every thing else under the sun, and telling everybody that would listen how he cured their sores. It was enough to make a person sick. He even claimed that he could cure himself, and that was the reason that he was never sick! Hmmpf.

"Of course, he wasn't ever sick. No sir, not a day in his life. Never had the measles or the mumps like my Sally, and even when that terrible flu epidemic hit town he was just as chipper as you please. If you want incidents, I can tell you a dozen. There was one time when

he was about five and I was over visiting with his ma. He came running into the house telling some big story about a bird with a busted wing that he had fixed up. Of course, his ma shut him up; she always was too easy on him. Another time—"

THE man with the too big head and the serene features gazed softly at the witness stand. He remembered about the bird. He had been very young at the time and hadn't known, yet, that everyone didn't have *The Gift*.

He had found the little bird at the base of the old oak tree, scared and trembling from the dangers that threatened it out of its known element. He picked it up gently and felt the fluttering of its tiny heart in the palm of his hand. He saw that its wing was injured, and, with a feeling of pity and kindness, he located and repaired the injury. The little bird lay quietly in his hand, as if sensing a friend. Then it flew away into the blue sky.

He ran into the house to tell his mother about the bird that he had found helpless in the yard and how he had made it well so that it could fly again.

"Yes darling," his mother smiled tolerantly. "I'm sure you were a good boy."

He could see that she had a headache. He could see the pulse and flow of the waves of pain and he wondered why she didn't fix it. He was never sick. It was so easy to be

well . . .

With the directness of the very young he asked her, "Mother, why don't you make your headache go away?"

His mother dropped to her knees in front of him.

"Why you sweet boy," she said. "Always thinking of your mother. Here, kiss my head and the ache will go away."

Gravely he looked at her. Grown-ups were a funny lot. He didn't have to kiss her head to make the headache go away; but she was his mother and he loved her. If she wanted to pretend, why, then he would also. So he kissed her head and caused the ache and pain to recede and disappear. Laughing, his mother got to her feet, took two aspirin tablets, and shoed him out to play. Strange, that he couldn't remember Mrs. Holk being there . . .

"Thank you, Mrs. Holk," the prosecutor said. "That will be all for now unless the defense wishes to cross examine."

"No questions." The public defender leaned toward his client. "Are you sure that you won't testify in your own behalf?"

The man smiled and shook his head.

"May I call the next witness, your Honor?"

"Will you tell the court your name and position, please?"

"My name is Sylvia Johnson, and I am floor superintendent at the Rochelle School."

"Were you superintendent during the eight years that Carl Sloan was in commitment at that institution?"

"I was."

"Will you tell the court any pertinent facts concerning his behavior up to the time of his discharge?"

She smoothed the hem of her dress and looked thoughtful for a moment.

"At first Carl seemed to be the oddest of all of the children in the school. He seemed to think that he had some kind of miraculous healing powers and couldn't, or wouldn't, understand why the rest of us weren't similarly blessed."

She waited for the small titter to subside and then continued.

"However our rather necessarily stern measures soon cured him of his delusions, or, at least, so we thought at the time. After that, he didn't seem to be very much different from the others. A little more sullen, perhaps, and not quite as quick to learn the duties expected of him as some of the less handicapped children; but then, we can't work miracles at the school."

She paused and those nearest the quiet defendant turned and stared at him.

HE didn't even notice for he was once again ten years old and standing outside his cousin's bedroom window. He wasn't supposed to be there because Billy was sick with an odd virus and had been quarantined until the doctors had decided what ailed him.

"No," Billy said, in answer to his question. "Don't be silly. If I could get rid of this awful cough I would, wouldn't I?"

"I can," Carl replied, his youthful voice confident.

Of course Billy didn't believe him but Carl saw what was to be done and did it. Billy's dad, disturbed by the excited conversation, came and told Carl to go on home where he belonged; but Carl forgot his scooter and had to go back after it. He could hear Billy's parents talking in the living room.

"Carl is a very strange boy," said Billy's mother.

"If you ask me, he's half crazy. All of this wild talk about doctoring cats, and that dead frog that he said he brought back to life."

(This was not quite true, Carl knew. The frog had not been dead, only sick. He had proudly told his uncle of the incident only a day or two before.)

"I think that we should have a little talk with Jane. Surely, she can see that he is not normal. He should be in that school for abnormal children over in the valley." Billy's father said emphatically.

The next day his aunt and uncle had talked to his mother and Carl listened at the window. He knew that he wasn't supposed to eavesdrop but he was puzzled, and scared. At first, his mother answered the proposal with a flat "no", but his uncle's persuasions won out in the end. Tearfully, she finally agreed

that a year or two in the school might be of some help in correcting his too obvious imagination. The news spread rapidly and the tongue-waggers worked overtime.

"Did you hear about the Sloan boy?" one would ask.

"Oh, yes," another would answer. "Crazy as a loon, quite."

"I always knew that there was something wrong with that boy, him never getting sick and all that. His head always was too big for the rest of him. I knew all along that he was crazy, all right."

"They're going to ship him off to school, I understand. Well, good riddance I say. Wouldn't want my Henry associating with a goofy kid."

He didn't like to recall the school. It was dim and foreboding and the beds always seemed to be cold and dank. He learned quickly that none of the institutional authorities were interested in his Gift and after the first several rebuffs and their consequential punishments, he never again talked about it to anyone. He was, by force, a recluse; but he learned the lessons that they thought that he should learn, and, if they were much more simple than his intellect warranted, he didn't blame the teachers.

As if he could feel the stares of the curious people, Carl raised his head. The prosecutor was still examining the superintendent.

"Then he was released as fit to be assimilated by society when he was eighteen?"

The witness leaned forward in the box.

"Yes," she said intently. "The exact disposition of his case history was 'Simple minded, but perfectly harmless'."

SIMPLE minded? Yes, if shyness and oversenseness to people constitute simple mindedness. He did odd jobs for the townspeople and they tolerated him. Gardening, fetching and carrying, sweeping out the library. He read. Avidly he read everything that he could find. He learned about Mendel and his peas, and he knew what he was. An ugly word, a *Mutant*. It made him different and gave him a Gift that no one believed that he had, or wanted him to exercise.

That crazy Sloan, or that half-wit Sloan, the townspeople called him, but he didn't care. He had never had any friends or companions and therefore felt no need for any. The small animals were his friends, and the children. He was never too busy to make a kite, or mend a toy or a skinned knee. He never mentioned his Gift but silently, unnoticed, as he went his shy way around the town, performed the small services that he was able to, unknown to the recipients. Some little aid, some little kindness every day. He was happy.

Then they brought Henry Jones, bitter and disillusioned, home from the hospital in the city. He had been kicked in the head by a horse

while he was away at college, and would never see again. The doctors all agreed on that point. He was permanently blind. Carl was trimming the Jones' hedge the first day that they pushed Henry out for his daily airing in the sun. He saw the blood clot that blocked the nerves to the brain center and his powerful mind worked smoothly, efficiently.

"Open your eyes," Carl said simply. "You can see."

"It was a miracle," everyone said. "A true miracle."

The newspapers scented a lucky circumstance and whipped up a human interest story that was more fantasy than fact; the wire services carried the story and people flocked to see the person who had performed a miracle. By twos and threes they came. Then by scores. They came to see because they were curious, or to be healed of some real or imagined ill. By the hundreds, by the thousands, they came. The lame, the halt, and the blind. The doctors, lawyers, ministers, newspaper men, newreel cameramen, zealots. Men, women and children; from near and afar. The religious, and the heretics. He couldn't begin to help all of those who came to him. Some, with missing organs or diseased in a manner impossible for him to aid, were turned away and added their cries to the pack who bitterly denounced him. For the most part his work was confined to the eyes of a few, but the numbers

of those he helped without their knowledge he knew were legend.

The crowd expected to see miracles and they demanded to see them. His failure to perform according to their tastes set off disputes that swept across the country. Was he a healer or a charlatan? A wise man or a fool? A public benefactor or a fraud?

"He has never healed anyone," learned doctors gave statements to the papers. "It's all a matter of mass hypnosis. He tells the ignorant that they are cured and, for a short while they actually force themselves to believe that they are cured. A very simple matter, indeed."

He went on ministering to the crowds that increased daily. He asked nothing for his work, and they gave nothing; but the popcorn vendors, the soda pop dispensers, the ice cream wagons, had a field day. It was a circus and they assigned extra policemen to control the frenzied crowds.

He remembered the day, finally, they brought a little girl, suffering from leukemia, from a distant city. The best doctors had given their best to save her, and they had failed. The distraught parents were grasping at the last straw. He knew that it was much, much too late for him to do anything to aid her, but he tried. She looked at him with her large, beautiful eyes, set so deep in her pale face, and arose from the ambulance couch and walked a few steps toward him. Then she col-

lapsed and died. The eager crowd pushed forward to get a better view and some were trampled. Some were injured, and some, the weak and unlucky, were killed. The police, frightened and faced with an ugly situation for which they had no rules, arrested him and whisked him off to the county seat. The crowd slowly dispersed and soon the only evidence that they had ever been there was the mass of empty cartons, the soda bottles, and the damaged shrubbery in the town square . . .

The judge leaned over from his tall bench.

"Mr. Sloan," he said sonorously. "In view of the evidence presented by the people of this state this court has no recourse but to convict you for the deaths of seven people. The court finds you charged and adjudged guilty of five counts, four minor and one major. Perpetrator of an unlawful assembly, inciting a mob to violence—" the voice droned on and on until the sentence was pronounced.

The flash bulbs popped and the crowd mumbled and whispered as he was led back to his cell. He had known from the beginning of the trial that there could be but one ending. He hadn't asked for the deaths of anyone but through him they had died and it was best that the sentence of the court be exacted and the Gift forever stilled. The world was not ready for a power such as this, he knew. "Not now,

not yet, perhaps not ever . . .

THE wrought iron gates in the high stone wall clanged shut behind the official county car with a dismal finality. Later, he was taken to a small room and his clothes stripped from him, replaced with a simple two pieced garment. This, then, was to be the end of life, of awareness. No more to feel the warmth of the summer sun or the carressing coolness of the light spring wind. Yet, he felt no bitterness, no regrets, rather only a sense of vast loneliness in the knowledge that he would not be able to fulfill the promise of his life.

Straps were placed around his ankles and secured so that the sudden shock wouldn't tear them loose. A strap around each leg, just above the knee. More, biting into his wrists, his upper arms, and, finally, the two plates. They were placed carefully, one just behind and above each ear. A last quiet check to see that the bindings were in their

proper places.

The plates held his head in a vise-like grip and he couldn't turn it in any direction but he knew the time was at hand . . .

There was a sharp pain, blinding and searing. Starting in his head, just behind his eyes, and then permeating throughout his muscles and body. He jerked spasmodically, but the strong bonds held him fast. For a long agonizing moment the pain persisted, and then the welcome blackness, nothing . . .

The young interne smiled at the officiating doctor.

"That was a very nice operation, sir. A wonderful discovery that electronically destroying a part of the brain will cure some forms of insanity. Of course, he won't have much of his ego left, but he will be able to obey simple orders and do menial tasks, and, at least he will be sane."

"Yes," the doctor said cheerfully as he disconnected his apparatus, "at least he will be sane."

THE END

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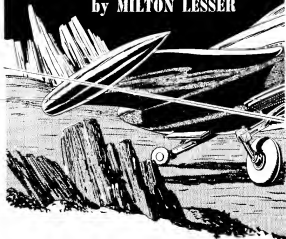
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THE OLD WAY

by MILTON LESSER



A man could walk around the tiny asteroid in the space of a few hours. But Jerry had only minutes, to find and use — an invisible weapon!

LIKE I expected, the airgrounds were crowded with thousands of the drifter-families waiting for the big blast-off tomorrow. They thronged about uncertainly, in anxious little knots, chattering

friendly, meaningless things, making just friends who would be forgotten in the bustle and competition, after blast-off.

Gramps stood apart from all this, and when he saw me he came run-



ing through the mob on spindly legs, waving his arms frantically so that I wouldn't miss him. As if I could. If there was anything more incongruous here on the Martian land-

scape, anything that seemed more out of place than did old Gramps, I didn't see it. Two hundred years ago in another homestead town, maybe he would have fit in. The only thing I

know about that is what I read in books, but I could picture Gramps with his battered old corncob pipe and his wizened face, leading a team of mules or oxen or whatever animals they used.

"Hey, Jerry," he called. "Hey, kid, I got it!"

I'm no kid. I'm twenty-seven, six feet two, and I probably weigh twice as much as Gramps does, wringing wet. But that's the way he was.

"Where's Clair?" I asked him. I hadn't seen my wife in a month. She had gone to the Martian Fair with Gramps to put in a bid for one of the old derelict ships, and now I had come here to join them, with a dime, a quarter and a crumpled dollar bill hardly filling the emptiness of my jumper-pocket.

"That girl!" He whistled. "She's back at the ship now, cleaning and polishing, putting everything together with spit and string so you wouldn't know the old Karden Cruiser."

I felt something gnawing away, deep inside my stomach, and it wasn't just that I was hungry. "The *what?*" I demanded.

GRAMPS smiled, and right then I could have seen him rocking on a chair on a little porch, with a garden full of rose hushes and crab grass. I could have seen him anyplace but here with Clair and me, on the eve of the great blast-off for the asteroid belt. "The *what?*" I said again.

"The old Karden Cruiser, Jerry.

Neat little job. And cheap — they almost gave it away. You shoulda seen those durned fools. No one else bid for it, I had it all to myself, first bid."

I tried to be patient. "You didn't expect anyone else to bid for *that*, did you?"

He had a hurt look on his face. "Why not? A good ship, kid. When I was your age, younger, I went to Venus on one. I can remember—"

"That's it," I told him. "Fifty years ago the Karden might have been a good ship, but not now. Not now, Gramps. It's as obsolete as a pea-shooter. Will it run?"

"You're durned tootin' it'll run. What do you think I paid? Go ahead, guess."

Something was still gnawing at my stomach. Gramps had had three hundred dollars to purchase our ship and equipment. You could stretch three hundred dollars a long way if you bought wisely these days. "You tell me," I said.

"Hundred and fifty. 'Nother hundred and a quarter for supplies—"

There's some old saying about letting old dogs lie or not crying over spilled milk or some such thing, but anyway, I reminded him, "For another twenty-five or thirty dollars you could have got a Wilson '13, maybe even a twelve-hank Carpenter."

"Couldn't," Gramps said. "Kid, let me tell you, I saw the nicest *gui-tar*. One of them old Martian types with eight strings, you know. Twenty-five hucks . . ."

I looked at him a long time without saying anything. When you're down to just a few dollars in these depression years, everything counts, every last penny. But my folks had died in the panic and riots of '24 and Gramps had reared me since almost before the time I could reach the wart on his knee.

"Let's go look at our Karden," I said.

GRAMPS was beaming proudly. "There she is," he told me. "Section G, Row 14, Ship 7. Beauty, eh?"

As far as you looked, you couldn't see anything but the old ships, all lined up, row on row of them. Some glistening with new paint if they had been bought as early as yesterday and sprayed today, others still dull and cracked with caked jet-slag and the erosion of a dozen atmospheres, all with people scurrying in and out of them, getting new faces and new entrails for blast-off tomorrow.

The Karden squatted in row 14, a short, stubby grub-like boat whose jet-slag completely hid the original paint job. But I didn't want to say another thing about it. I just hoped the Karden could get us where we were going, even if it burped and hiccupped like a drunken driver all the way.

Clair opened the lock and I saw her red hair framed against the dark interior of the ship, and I hardly remembered Gramps was there. We'd been married two

months, and separated for half that time, with me getting my last month's paycheck in New York so I'd have money for the liner-fair to Canal City.

Clair cried, "Welcome aboard ship, Captain Brooks, wel . . . Umm-m, Captain, that was nice . . . Umm-m, again . . ."

Gramps coughed. "You two gonnas stand there mooning over each other all afternoon, or do we get some work done?"

"It's just about all finished," Clair told him. She snuggled up close once more and then skipped out of my arms, leading us through the lock and into the Karden.

It looked more like the inside of a packing crate than a spaceship. Ideally, the old Kardens were two-man cruisers, at a time when you strapped yourself into a bunk and just about remained there until you hit atmosphere. Now Clair had readied three makeshift bunks, and our supplies stood piled tight against the bulkheads and as high as the ceiling in several places. I had to take Clair's word that the ship's old hull was sealed and could be pressurized — there wasn't enough space for me to see for myself.

The trip had left me a bit bleary, and Clair, who had worked all day, yawned a little while she opened a can of beans and bacon for supper. We sat around against the packing cases and we smoked. Then I checked a few things which remained to be checked, and I suggested we turn in. Clair nodded, but

Gramps said no, he had a little unfinished business yet.

I needed sleep, every bit of it I could get, for the grueling run tomorrow. I leaned back and stretched out, with my feet sticking out a good half a foot beyond the edge of the bunk, and then I heard Gramp's unfinished business.

The nasal twang of the eight-stringed Martian guitar blended with the dubious qualities of Gramp's voice:

*He'll hug and he'll kiss you
And tell you more lies
Than the cross ties on the railroad
Or the stars in the sky . . .*

AT an hour before sunrise we tuned in our radio and heard Governor Eddington's voice cut through the static. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is now exactly fifty-nine minutes and thirty-seven seconds until blast-off. Let me review the rules for you, to avoid any unpleasantness later.

"One. No ship is to leave before the signal. Any ship which does so is automatically disqualified, and your claim will not be recognized.

"Two. Any asteroid is fair prey, but the government strongly recommends that you consider two items. First, those asteroids which lie within the belt itself and which do not have overly eccentric orbits are preferable since the government supply ships will visit them much more frequently. Second, you will benefit by selecting an asteroid with one or more of the old abandoned min-

ing domes, for two reasons. With slight repairs you can live within the domes, and also their existence assures you of profitable mineral material.

"Three. Vesta, the government base within the Belt, is not to be landed upon.

"Four. Each ship is restricted to one asteroid, and once your selection is made it must be a permanent one.

"Five. No more than one ship can claim a given asteroid, and the automatic chronometer within each ship will radio the moment of landing to Vesta, thus taking care of any priority claims.

"Six. Claim jumping will be considered by the Federal Worlds Government as an act of piracy and will be punished accordingly.

"Seven. In the event that an asteroid is abandoned for any reason, a new ship may claim it at once, and the departing ship can claim no other asteroid.

"If you have any questions, relay them to your Section Official in the fifty-five minutes which remain. Good luck to all of you . . ."

The rules were thorough, all right. This could turn out to be a two-way proposition which would help both the Government and the families, and the Government wanted it to be a rousing success. In the first place, there were literally thousands of families, all waiting tensely for blast-off. None of them had been earning sufficient income, thanks to the depression following the final East-

West war on Earth, and now it was hoped that they could earn their keep by mining the asteroids.

Further, I knew that the Government had been forced to abandon its mineral deposits on all the asteroids except Vesta, and now it could use the extra wealth from the silent mines which waited on a thousand little worlds in deep space between Mars and Jupiter.

I sat smoking cigarette after cigarette, until Clair reminded me that the supply wasn't infinite. She poured over our charts, studying the three or four asteroids which had seemed most promising, looking up with a smile now and then to watch Gramps strum his guitar and sing about a fly with a blue tail.

The radio barked, "Three minutes to blast-off!"

Outside, I could hear the roar of a thousand rocket engines tuning up, and a shroud of smoke and fire blanketed the field.

"Two minutes!"

"Hey, Gramps," I said. "Put down that banjo and strap yourself into a bunk. We're set to go—"

"It's a guitar," he told me. "A guitar. Okay, kid, plenty of time."

I stood up and helped Clair into her bunk, kissing her lightly on the lips. "I'm a little scared," she said.

"Don't be silly. Nothing to be afraid of, honey." I was glad she couldn't feel me trembling.

Gramps was next, and I saw to it that his straps were fastened properly, then I sat down again in the pilot-

chair, buckling a heavy leather belt across my thighs.

"Thirty seconds!"

I remember wondering vaguely if the Karden could get us to the Belt in one piece, and not hours behind every other ship. Then a shrill whistle outside was going "beep-beep-beep!" and I pulled the firing lever back all the way.

I grinned at Clair. "How do you like weighing exactly nothing?"

"You always told me I was a little too skinny, Captain Brooks, sir!"

Gramps scowled darkly. "Aw, you two kids are just making fun of the Karden, that's all. So what if we ain't got any gravity to speak of?"

The Karden had been built before each ship had its own little gravity unit, and no one had ever bothered to refit her. Clair had set up the guide-ropes right after acceleration, and now we floated around the cramped little cabin of the ship if we weren't careful. I had to admit Gramps was right, however. A little inconvenience like this didn't really matter, and the important thing was the fact that I could look out the port and see all the little motes of the thousand other ships gleaming in the sunlight like tiny space-born fireflies. The Karden was definitely holding its own.

"She's built for speed." Gramps told us. "In the old days there was no such thing as gravity-equalizers anyhow. This soft new generation . . ."

I winked at Clair and said, "Go on. Go play your fiddle, Gramps, and leave astrogation to the soft new generation."

"It's a hanjo," he said. "I mean a gwé-tar!"

Through the fore-port there was a haze of milky white which in a few hours would separate out into the thousands of little planetoids, each a tiny mote following its predestined course around the sun. Actually, some weren't so small. There was the big bulk of Ceres, with a diameter close to five hundred miles, Vesta, and some of the other big babies, but for the most part the asteroids were tiny cosmic specks, less than a mile across.

"Okay," Clair said, "which one?"

That was a good question. You had to consider several things. First, some ships sped through space faster than our Karden, and they'd claim the really first-rate asteroids before we even reached the Belt. Of the second-raters, you had to consider what sort of mineral deposits they had, which would be the simplest to mine, and so forth.

"How's about 4270?" I said.

She checked the charts. "Umm-m. Diameter, half a mile. Eccentricity of orbit, .17. Tilted to the ecliptic, .08. Two deserted mining domes, excellent condition. High-grade copper ore, no power tools needed. Sounds swell, Jerry."

Gramps stopped tuning his guitar. "Copper? Did I hear you say copper?" He snorted. "In my day men went prospecting for diamonds and

other precious stones. Or for gold or pitchblend . . ."

"Ever find any?" I wanted to know.

"Well, no. But that doesn't mean I couldn't have. I was just too husy with the women on the outworlds—"

I looked at Clair and Clair looked at me. "4270," we said together, and when Clair checked the charts again she found that its present orbital position was just a few degrees off to the left.

"Two hours," I grunted. "Maybe three. If we're lucky, she'll be deserted . . ."

Clair smiled. "Two domes there, Jerry. Hah — a winter home and a summer home."

"Ain't no seasons on an asteroid," Gramps said very seriously. "Of course, if you two kids want, you can have one dome and I can have the other. Might be a good idea at that."

Clair told him not to be silly, that we couldn't get along without his guitar playing anyway, and then I was husy turning us the few degrees which would bring us into orbital conjunction with 4270. Ahead and all around us the little sparks which were spaceships fanned out in all directions, hurtling for their homesteads out here beyond Mars. It was nice to know that in just a few hours—if luck held—we'd be setting up home, living in our own place instead of the crowded barracks they set up for transient workers back on Earth. Nice? Hell, that's all we'd

been thinking about since the announcement came through six months ago.

You really feel a small turn in an old Karden Cruiser rocketing outward at top speed. I could feel the gravity slamming me back down against the right-hand cushions of the pilot chair, and I heard Gramps muttering something under his breath. With Clair, he had remained out of his bunk so that he could watch us blast in toward the asteroid, and now I could picture each of them grasping stanchions for all they were worth, peering out of the port.

I couldn't turn around to watch, of course. This landing on a tiny asteroid is tricky business. You can't just come in and set her down as easy as all that, floating in on the cushion of a five-hundred mile atmosphere.

The Karden came in slowly, at right angles to the orbit, and I saw that 4270 was an amorphous hunk of greenish rock, craggy and mountainous, if you call a ponderously turning rough-hewn slab of stone less than three thousand feet across mountainous.

I worked the studs slowly, feeling the breath go out of my lungs with each one, and soon we had executed a turn of almost ninety degrees, with 4270 tumbling along parallel to us now, just a few miles off in the void. You could feel its weak gravity, tugging like a child's fingers might tug at your overcoat as you ran in another direction.

I pulled up all the studs together, and I could breathe again. For a moment it seemed that 4270 wouldn't be strong enough to grab us and hold us, to reel us in slowly like a fisherman with a whopper at the end of his line. But her distance didn't increase, either—and we went spinning along through the void with her like a lopsided dumbbell, the tiny planetoid and the smaller Karden.

Soon 4270 grew in the fore-port, and quite suddenly she wasn't alongside us any longer, but down below. Every time you come in for planet-fall you get that sensation, but it never ceases to be strange—one moment you're heading toward something which is in front of you, the next you're hurtling down upon it headfirst.

Only with 4270's light gravity, we didn't exactly hurtle. It was more like floating, slowly at first and then faster, and then I decided I'd better give one short blast from our forerockets to brake the fall. I pressed the stud and waited. There was nothing. Momentarily, the fore-tubes had jammed. Of all the times . . .

I heard Clair calling my name, "Jerry, Jerry!" and then 4270's jagged tumbling surface expanded up all around us and the planetoid didn't look so small any more. It looked huge, it could have been Jupiter. There came a grinding bump, and I thought I could hear my safety strap snapping. The black-light dials of the instrument panel zoomed up

at me from someplace far beyond 4270, it seemed, and I met them head first with a hundred rocket tubes snorting inside my skull.

"GOOD morning," Clair said cheerfully.

"Good *what*?" I answered, not so cheerful.

"You slept for twelve hours, so now it's morning."

"And darn you," Gramps chimed in. "You made one hell of a mess out of that instrument board. Why don't you be a mite careful . . ."

"Hey!" I sat up suddenly, and the pinwheels began to go around in my head like at the Martian Fair. Only bigger. Brighter. "After that crash, did the chronometer radio our landing here to Vesta?"

Clair nodded. "I thought of that. I radioed Vesta for confirmation, and it came. But right after that the radio went blooie, so now any music we hear will have to come from Gramps."

"I can oblige," Gramps said, running for his guitar, but I shook my head.

"Hold it! We've got a lot of work to do."

"Yeah, sure," said Gramps. "Only what did you think we was doing while you slept peaceful like a baby? We wasn't playing or singing, I'll tell you that."

Clair explained, "We were exploring, Jerry, after we made sure you were all right. We're less than a hundred yards from one of the domes here, and it looks darned

good. Of course, I don't know yet if it can be pressurized or if there'll be any leaks, but I think we can answer yes to the first question and no to the second."

"What about the second dome?"

"Just about like this one, half a mile around the planet. Living quarters in both, plenty of abandoned equipment. You also can do open pit mining until you burrow clean through the planet. Rich lode, too, I'd say."

"Good," I told her, and I stood up a bit shakily and took her in my arms. I kissed her soundly.

"Jerry. Come on, stop. How can we get any work done this way, Jerry? . . . Ooo, Jerry . . ."

A few moments later, we all donned our spacesuits.

EFFORTLESSLY, we carried great stacks of supplies across 4270's crumbled, broken surface. The light gravity seemed hardly to exist at all, and I think I could have lifted the Karden Cruiser bodily if I desired. We made exactly two trips from the ship to the dome's airlock, our grav-plates clomping up and down soundlessly under the space-boots — ordinarily it'd have taken us a whole day to unload the Karden.

The horizon was a crazy distorted thing no more than three hundred feet away, where the planetoid's surface bent away almost at right angles, and right on the crest against the blackness of the sky rested our Karden. It looked pretty good on a

place which Gramps told me Clair had called ghastly when they first stepped outside to explore, but the dome looked even better.

We stood within the lock now, and with a little squeal of delight which I picked up over our suit intercoms, Clair ran for one of the dull metal structures.

"Look in here," she called back over her shoulder, and I entered through the doorway just in time to see her unscrewing her helmet.

I yelled something loud over the intercom, I don't remember what, and then I flicked off the grav-plate button in the glove of my left hand and dove at Clair.

I caught her just above the mid-section and we went down in a heap. I switched on my grav-plates again.

"Just to show me how strong you are," she pouted, "you don't have to come flying through the air and landing on my belly. Lucky you weigh less than a pound without the grav plates. Only quit trying to be funny."

"Who's trying to be funny? There's only two things wrong with taking your helmet off now. First, we haven't warmed this place, and you'd have frozen your pretty little head off in half a minute. Second, there's less air here than in a vacuum tube, and even after we turn on the air generators I want to examine the dome for possible leaks before you go around taking off your helmet. See?"

"Y-yes." She suddenly looked

frightened. "It's just that the place looks so warm and homey, Jerry."

It did. We were standing in a foyer and I could see a couple of bedrooms off on the left, comfortable, all metal and metal fibre construction. Further down the hall there was a pantry and when Clair opened the door we found it to be full of canned goods, all glued to the shelf lightly against the tricks which could be played by the negligible gravity. Beyond that, we found a first-class, compact kitchen unit, and you should have seen Clair's eyes light up. If there's anything that makes a girl sparkle all over, it's the first sight of a good kitchen over which she's to have domain. You can be anywhere — New York or here on 4370 or out on Pluto, it wouldn't matter. She hardly heard a word I said for the next ten minutes, as I patiently lined up the things we must do first. Three things, primarily. We had to start the heating units within the dome, do the same for the air generators, and check the dome itself for any leakage.

GRAMPS took care of items one and two, and I felt an urge to take off my helmet without checking further. But that was silly. We had played the game right thus far, and it would be pointless to get into serious trouble over a thing like that.

So for the next fifteen minutes, Clair and I just knocked off our grav-plates and swarmed all over the

inside of the dome like a couple of trained houseflies. From this height I could see almost half way around my side of the little planet, and Clair's line of vision probably came close to meeting mine someplace around the equator. And after a time I was satisfied that my side of the dome couldn't lose as much as a molecule of air.

"Tight as a thermos bottle," I called over the intercom. "How's yours, Clair?"

Her answer was a scream. It jarred me from my precarious hold on the under surface of the dome, and I went floating to the ground as light as a feather.

Clair still clung up on top yelling so loud that the intercom only reproduced the sound as garbled noise and static. And I couldn't do anything but float down slowly, with Gramps motioning me down with his arms, as if I could do anything to hurry.

Clair scrambled down her side of the dome and waited there next to Gramps, hands on hips, looking up at me like a vexed mistress might look at her lap dog when he didn't come to her call soon enough. But she looked more composed now, and she took off her helmet. The air situation, then, was all right, and I unscrewed my own fishbowl and let it float down beside me.

The air was a bit musty, but otherwise good, and I judged the temperature to be about fifty degrees now. Ever strip in mid air? I peeled off my spacesuit and watched it

float down too, agonizingly slow, and finally I alighted in my leather jumper.

Clair said, "It's a—"

SHE never finished the sentence. Something jarred the ground under me like a miniature earthquake, and I sat down hard.

"A ship," Gramps said. "Clair saw a ship coming in on the other side!"

"Now it's landed," Clair told us. It wasn't necessary. That jar could only have been produced by a ship or a man-sized meteor.

"So what?" I wanted to know. "So someone made a mistake and landed here. Our claim's already in. When their claim goes through, Vesta'll tell them."

"Sure," Gramps brightened.

Clair smiled too, as if to say, you're right, so what are we worrying about?

Only my enthusiasm didn't last long. My reasoning was tilted. It was warped. Crazy. "Uh-uh," I shook my head. "It isn't as simple as that. First place, Vesta was supposed to beam a broadcast all over the Belt, telling who landed where."

"Hmm-m," Gramps mumbled.

"Maybe," Clair said. "Maybe. And that ship, Jerry, it was too big. Much too big to be one of the family ships. One of those long, tapering, narrow-finned cruisers, brand new."

I was trying to digest this latest bit of information, when Clair popped her helmet back on her head and ran for the airlock. I called to

her, but she couldn't hear me — she was going to see just who our visitors were.

"Fiery young thing!" Gramps snorted, but I hardly heard him. I zipped myself inside my suit as fast as I could and started to run for the lock. Only I didn't. I flew. I had forgotten to snap on the grav-plates, and once again I had that agonizing sensation of floating groundward.

I made it, cursing, then I tore through the lock, in record time. When I reached the Karden, Clair came darting around its other side and ran toward me, out of breath, half stumbling. We got back inside the dome, and I said:

"Well?"

"Oh, Jerry. Jerry!"

"What is it, hon?" Clair got excited easily, but not this way.

"Some men were out of the ship and I halted them. Someone shot at me—"

"What?"

"Yes! He didn't say a word. He just lifted an ugly-looking gun and fired. A big column of rock disappeared right next to me, Jerry. Just like this," She snapped her fingers. "He shot at me with a disintegrator. A *disintegrator*, Jerry . . ."

I gulped. How would you feel being trapped on a rock less than half a mile across, without any weapons, with your radio shot to hell, without enough fuel in your ship to get you half way to any other asteroid, when you knew that around on the night side were may-

be a dozen armed men, claim jumpers, ready to kill you on sight?

I gulped again.

"TAKE it easy," Gramps advised us. "Now, just you both relax. There has to be a way outa this, only we ain't found it yet."

The only part of his statement I could agree with was the very last, only I had to admit he had a point there. Just wasn't any use, as Gramps would say, for Clair and me to go running around like a couple of chickens without their heads, the way we'd been doing for the past few hours.

"Okay," I said. "Let's look at this thing. Let's see exactly where we stand."

"More like it," Gramps nodded his head.

Clair said, "Whoever they are, they landed here illegally. And they want our copper . . ."

I brightened, but only for a moment. "No, I think you're off the beam, honey. If it's our claim alone they're after, why just this stinking little asteroid? There are lots bigger and lots richer, yet they chose this one. They want something else. But what?"

Clair said we'd come back to that later. "First," she said. "just what can we expect them to do? I mean now, or in the immediate future."

I considered. "Well, temporarily at least, they probably won't do a thing. Or will they?"

"You're darned right they won't,"

Gramps said. "They won't bust this dome up right away to get at us, nossir. First they'll see if they can get us without doing that."

It made good sense. Whatever their purpose, both domes could be a valuable asset, and maybe they'd play with us, cat and mouse, before they applied the disintegrators to our dome.

"Sure," said Gramps. "Just like the old days of the East-West war when it spread out to the planets. An army can't be everywhere at once, 'specially not all over the System. Right?"

"Right," Clair said, and I nodded.

"Hey," Gramps suggested, "you don't suppose they are Ruskies, do you?"

"No," I said, smiling. I reminded him that the war had been over before I was born.

"Hmm-m, yes. Did I ever tell you the time I was fighting near Gossena on Ganymede? I was a foot-soldier, y'know."

HE had told us many times and I said so, but he didn't bat an eyelash. "Anyway," he said, "it was a war of nerves. We tried to scare them, and they tried to scare us, one way or another, and the side that did the most scaring won. Us."

Clair wanted to know what all that had to do with this.

"Easy, kid. Just hold your horses. These guys on the other side of 4270 will be using a war of nerves with us, a real simple one. They know it'll be maybe a month before the

government ship comes—"

"What about the radio?" I said. "Won't they think we called for help?"

"Nossirree. Not if they're smart. If we did call for help they could hightail it out of here, pronto. The way Clair describes that ship, they could beat anything the Government has in the Belt, anything short of a battle-cruiser, and there ain't none out beyond Mars. No, if they're smart they'll have to figure that something went wrong with our radio, or we'd a called for help right away. It's an easy gamble for them to take — they can always zoom away."

Everything Gramps had said was beginning to make a lot of good sense, and I motioned him to continue.

"Sooo, their war of nerves is easy. They just wait for us to make the first wrong move, and then they get us. Blop! Real simple with a disintegrator."

He wasn't kidding. All you had to do was disintegrate a person, his ship, his belongings, and you'd have committed a pretty air-tight murder. Of course, the old legality about a corpse had been chucked out the window years ago when the first disintegrators were developed, but in a case like this, the only thing the government would have to go on was the fact that our landing here on 4270 had been recorded. Not much. Pitifully inadequate. And I told them that now.

"Swell," Clair said. "Only please,

Jerry, cut it out. You sound like you're crying at your own funeral. I'm scared . . . "

"Sure," said Grampa, "we ain't licked. We'll just have to figure out a war of nerves just a bit better than theirs. War of nerves, that's it. I can remember, outside Gossena . . . The Ruskies employed Martian mercenaries, y'know . . . "

"That won't be easy," Clair reminded him. "Especially since we don't even know why that ship came here. We can't even find out."

I grinned. "Who says we can't?" I picked up my fishbowl helmet and plopped it ungentily over my head.

"What the heck are you doing?" Clair asked me.

My voice must have sounded muffled from under the helmet as I said: "Simple. Our intercom can pick up theirs. As soon as some of them pop outside their dome and start talking, we'll know."

That much was true. The intercom could pick up any similar conversation on the entire tiny planet. It could do that, but it wasn't directional. In other words, you'd hear voices, all right, only you wouldn't know where they were coming from. One trouble, however, marred the idea: you couldn't tell how long it would be before some of our visitors decided to lift themselves up and venture outside the dome. Might be any time now, or it might not be for days, or it might be just once, and then briefly, for as long as it would take them to stroll to our dome, disintegrate the lock, march through,

and turn us into three specks of molecular dust.

I sat grimly with the helmet over my head, waiting. All I got was static.

WE TOOK TURNS, and our hopes for a happy home life out here on 4370 were shot to hell. One of us would sit listening, head buried in his helmet, another would bustle about, keeping the functions of the dome in order, and the third would sleep.

It was my turn to sleep, and I can remember the beginning of what would have been a corker of a dream. The visitors in the other spaceship weren't men at all, but hideous monsters from some nameless extra-Solar place, trying to decide where in the Solar System they'd like to live. They seemed ornery enough to decide on crowded Earth.

I never knew for sure. One of them was breathing down my neck, then poking me, and I sat up fast. It was Grampa, and he was scowling at me frantically inside his fishbowl helmet.

I didn't have to be told. My own helmet sat securely on my shoulders in a matter of seconds, and I listened. You could hardly tell the voices apart, but from the conversation you knew that there were two of them.

" . . . all over this planetoid. Aw, what's the use? The boss just had a wrong notion, that's all."

"I dunno. Can't be sure. This is a small place, yeah: but there's enough wrinkles and folds to keep

you looking for months. We ain't covered nothing yet. Also, how's a-about inside the other dome. It could be there, eh?"

"Well, it better not be. If those guys in there find it before us . . ." I didn't know what "it" was but I liked this voice better. It was pessimistic, and the more pessimistic our visitors were, the better I'd like it.

"No, it ain't in the other dome." The rat, I thought. "It wouldn't be in either dome, stupid, or the miners here before the depression woulda found it. I was wrong — it's outside somewhere, all right."

Clair sat with us now, hunched over elbows on knees, listening through her own helmet.

"So we just march around this lousy rock until we find it."

"Yeah. But take it easy, stupid. It'll be worth it. A weapon like that, what power . . ."

"I don't know. We better find it soon. The wife's in Chawka City on Io, and there's a damn saloon-keeper there—"

"Haw, haw, haw! A family man, a regular family man, that's what we got with us. But don't worry, we'll find it. The Ruskies left that thing here someplace, and don't worry, we'll get it. The boss ain't no dodo . . ."

"Well, I'd feel a lot better if we got rid of those guys in the other dome. It'd be a lot safer."

"Just shut up. When the boss tells us to do something, we'll do it. Otherwise, stop yammering."

So our pessimistic friend wanted

us dead too? I hoped that his wife would commit the unpardonable crime with every man-jack in Chawka City. It would serve the rat right.

Then there was a lot of garbled static and no more talking. Evidently the two men had entered their dome again and had removed their helmets. No more talking, exactly as if they had ceased to exist. And after the one way contact had been established, it was almost eerie.

GRAMPS was jubilant. "There y'are, kids. Simple as that."

"As what?" I said.

"Kid, don't you read your history?"

"He goes in for lurid novels," Clair said.

"Waal, it's like this. Right at the end of the war it was rumored the Ruskies developed a super-duper weapon. Something really hot, that would make the atom-bomb look like a kid's squirt gun. They didn't have a chance to use it, and when the war was over they hid it out here in the Belt somewheres, thinking maybe they'd get another chance. So them guys think this is the place. Hnm-m, maybe they're right, and if we could find that weapon before them . . . Oh boy!"

I shook my head. It was a pretty little story, with one major flaw. "There's no such weapon," I said. "I remember the history part of it, all right. But I also remember what followed. Government sent out hun-

dreds of ships, in ten years they combed the Belt. No secret asteroid. No Rusky cache. No weapon. No nothing."

"Well, these guys are looking—"

I told him, "On Earth, people still look for Captain Kid's treasure, and for sea serpents, too. They just won't find either. There aren't any. Nope, Gramps — there's just a lot of copper on this asteroid, that's all. If we could convince our visitors of that, they'd get out quick."

"Well, we can't," Clair said. "You heard those two guys. Their boss is as sure of finding that weapon here as he's sure of anything."

I began to smile, and I think I even laughed a little, because they both looked at me queerly. "That's it," I said.

"That's what?" Evidently, my enthusiasm had not carried to Clair.

"The way we'll do it. We'll use Gramps' idea, the war of nerves . . ."

"Hot dog!" Gramps purred like an impossibly ancient kitten.

"We'll agree with them. Okay, there's a weapon here, a pretty awful thing. We'll talk over our intercom and let them know we know it too."

"Uhuh," said Clair, definitely interested. "They'll probably be listening, just like us. Go on, Jerry, let's hear more."

"Sure. And we'll go a step further."

"I got you!" Gramps cried. "We'll really find the weapon." There just was no convincing a die-

hard romantic who had fought in the last war.

"Yes and no," I said. "There is no weapon, none here and none anywhere else in the Belt. *Only we'll make believe that we find one.* A war of nerves, Gramps. Maybe we can scare them the hell off this planet."

"Humm-m," said Gramps. "I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking."

Because we all liked the idea, we continued to speak of it for hours, and this is the way things boiled down.

Item. It had to be an awful weapon, something that would frighten a man and make the little hackles stand up on the back of his neck, and something which apparently could be applied most readily here on 4270. They were convinced that a weapon did exist, good: they'd believe almost anything we could concoct.

Item. This one I didn't like. Since our two talkative friends had intimated that their boss knew the weapon couldn't be within our dome, we'd have to go outside for the weapon and let them catch a glimpse or two of us prowling about. That could be dangerous, because they could pop us off with their disintegrators any time they got the urge. Which would probably be as soon as they saw something tangible at which to fire. We'd have to flit about like shadows. Less than shadows.

Item. We'd start "broadcasting"

to them, and we'd pretend we didn't know we were doing it. The bigger the lie the better it would sound, and we'd have to start almost at once. This could be fun.

Item. We had nothing concretely in mind beyond that. But the important thing, as Gramps put it, was this: we'd be in the driver's seat, conducting the war exactly how we wanted, and they'd have to sit around guessing.

Gramps was chipper enough to strum a few notes on his guitar.

FOR three Earth days by the clock in our living quarters, we managed to stay out of trouble. And I think we were getting somewhere, too. Gramps would go outside with Clair, poking around amid the rubble, talking about how close they were coming. Then they'd let themselves be seen, just for the briefest moment, and they'd scoot back inside our dome, fast.

Probably, it was pretty safe at that. We could tell from what they said via intercom that our visitors were interested. And, if they thought we knew something, they'd be in no hurry to kill us. At the most, they'd want to take us alive and see what they could learn.

Gramps and Clair were outside, talking, and as I listened, I got an idea. If I went outside, too, our enemy would be confused into believing there were more of us. I could invent a few new voices and a few names and they might be led to believe we had a whole army here with

us. So what if our ship were small? This could have been the last of several trips . . .

"Confuse 'em," Gramps had said once. "Get 'em on the ground and tramp all over 'em with a war of nerves. Bury 'em under a pack of terrible lies, that's what." I'd do it.

I stood atop a pinnacle of rock and made myself look busy. If they had any lookouts perched high within their dome, they wouldn't miss seeing me, and I was gambling everything on the fact that they wouldn't shoot because they wanted to learn something from us.

Then I popped behind my pinnacle of rock, out of their range of vision, and I hauled myself up the other side. I did this a few times, and they probably thought half a dozen of us swarmed all over the rock, exploring.

I said, "If this ain't the place, I'll eat my hat."

"Can't tell, George," I said in a higher voice. "Might be. Might not. But we're getting close, that's for sure. Good thing we found those old Rusk charts."

Oh, I was having a glorious time. I said, for George, "We could blast those other guys out of their dome any time we want. So why are we waiting?"

I was getting cocky, and I used a deep bass this time. "You know the chief wants to have some fun with that weapon. 'No place better to try it,' he told me, 'than on our friends over there.' Just wait."

AN inspiration hit me, all at once. I had our weapon. "Yeah," this was my George voice again, "but what an awful way to die. I wonder if those charts are really true; you press a button, and anyone around who happens to be in contact with iron or steel just gets broiled alive."

I poured it on in my middle-sized voice. "That's it, okay. The charts wouldn't lie. Can you imagine what those Ruskies could have done with that in the War?"

"Uh-huh. That woulda hit everyone. You carry a blaster, it's steel. Disintegrator, too. Wear a spacesuit, you also get broiled. Go near a radio, same thing. Man, it scares you: hope the chief knows what he's doing."

"He knows," my good new friend George said, and because I figured they had heard enough for now of my terribly selective yet horribly universal weapon, I marched off my pinnacle and made my way back over the rubble toward our dome. I chuckled softly to myself. Clair and Gramps had doubtlessly heard of my new-weapon via their intercoms, and I thought they'd be mightily pleased. It had infinite possibilities in this war of nerves.

They were waiting for me outside the dome-lock, and I thought that was funny because I had expected to find them within the dome.

And then I ran. One, two, three figures stood within the dome, staring out solemnly at Gramps and Clair. I reached them and I tried

the lock. I didn't have to — I don't think I could have entered with a blow torch.

I looked at Clair and Clair looked at me, and then we both looked at Gramps. He shrugged eloquently enough, and after taking one last angry look at the three men within our dome, we turned and walked away. The angry looks made them smile, as we left one of them even thumbed his nose at us. That gesture, too, was eloquent. It said, *suckers!*

We retreated to the base of my pinnacle of rock, where we couldn't be seen from either dome. What had happened was simple. In my enthusiasm I had left our dome deserted, and apparently our trio of friends back there had found it that way. The dome-locks, of course, are manipulated from within, and there's no way to secure them from the outside. So the trio had walked in, closed the lock behind them, and we were stuck out on the cold, dark, airless surface of 4270.

I tried to scratch my head and nearly succeeded in cracking my helmet with a leatheroid glove. Gramps and Clair had gone out before me; they had perhaps an hour's air supply left. Maybe I had three, with luck.

The Karden didn't have enough air within its old hulk now to satisfy a lungfish in suspended animation, and by the time we could get its old generators working again, we'd be three asphyxiated corpses.

So, we could do two things. We

could wait out in the open like sitting ducks and wait for the unknown enemy to take us, or we could just sit here near our pinnacle of rock and suffocate.

I cursed myself soundly, but I stopped and tried to comfort her when I saw that Clair was crying. It isn't easy, not through a spacesuit and not when you think you'll be dead in not much more than minutes.

Gramps felt the fear too, he was muttering to himself. Clair murmured. "Jerry . . . Oh, Jerry . . . I don't want to die!"

I had to think fast. I had to think faster than I ever thought in my life, and generally I like to explore my way around a problem, looking at it from all angles. But the air left for Gramps and Clair could be measured in minutes now, and mine wasn't much more.

I said, "What are you worrying about? George and Harry and the other boys will have that thing rigged up in a couple of hours, sure. We'll give those guys in both domes a little bit of hell. Won't be a one left alive." I tried to make the butterflies remain in my stomach, to have them go anyplace but in my voice. It almost didn't work.

Clair and Gramps looked at me like I might be crazy or something, and I raised a gloved finger up and tried to line it up in front of my mouth to tell them to shut up.

Gramps said, "George and Harry?"
"Of course. They found it half an

hour ago, and now they're setting it up. Just a matter of time, so relax."

I squatted down on my hands and knees, making the gesture for silence again. I found a jagged little rock and started to trace lines in the powdery pumice. It was messy, but they could understand it. I wrote:

GO TO THEIR OLD DOME
AND GIVE UP. YOUR AIR
WON'T LAST. THEY WON'T
KILL. SCARED. QUESTION
YOU ABOUT WEAPON. RE-
MEMBER WHAT GORGE &
HARRY SAID ABOUT WEAP-
ON BEFORE, BUT PLAY A
LITTLE DUMB. LEAVE REST
TO ME.

I waited while I saw them reading it, then I rubbed it out. Clair shook her head. Her eyes told me plainly enough that she didn't want to die, but that she'd rather die out here with me than otherwise.

Gramps looked like he would rather be sitting someplace comfortable with his guitar, but he was trying to smile a little.

I crouched and wrote again, just three words:

PLEASE GO. NOW.

I erased the line with my boots and I waited, then I turned around for a long time and didn't look back at them. When I did, they were two tiny figures on the twisted, broken landscape, walking toward the second dome.

FOR a while I waited, and then I swarmed all over my pinnacle

again, like George and Harry and anyone else who might have been around. They could come and get me, of course, but I figured they wouldn't. Then they might never find the weapon. That was their dilemma, not mine. Mine was to do something along the lines of Gramps' war of nerves, and do something good, before my air ran out.

I said, "Watch it, George. Take it easy. Don't you think the chief ought to be around before you try anything?"

I climbed off the pinnacle so no one could see me. "Naw," I made George say. "I know what I'm doing. F'r gosh sakes, what could happen? I got the charts right here. I wanta hurry and get back to the wife in Canal City. Some damn bus driver . . ." I'd make it sound like their own story, and maybe they'd believe.

"Well, okay," my Harry said dubiously.

George sighed. "There. That does it. Now — watch."

Silence. I watched thirty seconds tick off on my suit clock, then I made Harry scream:

"George! Good God, George . . . Arrgh!"

I hoped the scream was a good one. Honest, it almost scared me. Poor George and Harry: I had killed them off quick enough. Now I had to invent new characters. For a brief moment I wondered what had happened to Clair and Gramps, but then I pushed them out of my mind. I couldn't afford to think of

that now.

I let six minutes pass. It was agonizing, but I did it. Then I did my best to invent two new voices.

"So, here's the spot, Mike. Funny, I don't see them."

Mike had a high, squeaky voice. "Hah-hah, don't worry, chief. They'll be around."

"I don't find your humor amusing. So—Mike. Mike! Look . . ."

I let my voice trail off. If this wasn't so damned serious, it could have been amusing. I was really living the part.

Mike said: "God, chief, both of 'em. Shrivelled up like that, burned to a crisp. Chief—"

"What can you do? I told them not to play games with it until I came, and they just didn't know how to work the damper. Fools, they could have killed us all. Well, suppose we take care of those people in the domes."

"You mean like this, chief?"

"Certainly, like this. No one asked them to butt in here."

I didn't say anything else for a while. I could feel myself sweating under the helmet, and momentarily, at least, I had run out of things to say.

Someone else came to my rescue. For the first time, one of the other party attempted direct intercom communication.

"Hey you out there," a voice said. "This is Reardon, in charge of this outfit." He sounded afraid. "Lay off or we'll blast these two prisoners

I got . . ."

"You're telling me to lay off?" I demanded, trying to think of something to say. "You're telling me to lay off? That's rich."

"What do you mean?" The voice was still frightened, and I began to feel a little better. They had fallen for this so far all the way.

"What do I care what you do to those two? They're a couple of home-steaders who happened to barge in here, an old man and a girl. Go ahead, kill 'em. What's the difference, you'll follow in a couple of minutes."

That got him. "Wait," he said. "Hold it, please."

I yawned, loud enough for the intercom to pick it up. I hoped I wasn't overdoing it. "Mike," I drawled, "set that thing up so we can finish the job and get out of here, eh? Now, be careful. Connect that dampening rig like that, that's it. Careful. Just make sure the pole fits into that hole real snug. There you are. You did it . . ."

"You *sure* you wanta use this thing on them, chief?" I had Mike say.

"Why in hell not? Come on. Now!"

The voice over the intercom was almost a shriek. "Stop! For the love of heaven please stop! Cut it out, please. Don't roast us. We give up! We—"

I said, "Who cares if you give up or not? I just want to try out my weapon. No one asked you to poke your nose in here like this. You hear

him, Mike? He gives up. That's funny."

Mike said, "It ain't so funny. If they give up, I say let 'em go. Hell, they won't give you any more trouble, chief."

The frightened voice was pleading now. "Listen to him, friend. Go ahead, listen. We give up, see? We're harmless. We'll go away. Anything. The weapon's all yours . . ."

"Well —"

"Go ahead, chief," Mike said.

"Umm-m. Well, okay. Hey you guys! All of you get into one dome, fast, and throw every gun you have outside. Your spacesuits, too. You'd better, because I don't exactly trust you. I'm going to give you five minutes and then I'm going to turn this thing on. Anyone has an ounce of iron or steel on him, he'll be broiled."

I WAITED, atop my pinnacle. I saw three figures running from the direction of our original dome, heading for the other one. In a moment, they disappeared over the close, jagged horizon. I said:

"That's about enough time, Mike. Turn it on."

I swaggered across the rubble-strewn asteroid. As I approached the dome I began to feel nervous, but I didn't stop my swaggering. Outside was a great pile of dis-integrators, blasters, and heaters, plus a dozen spacesuits, assorted knives, pens, pencils, coins, pots, pans, flashlights, all sorts of tools—even a heap of leatheroid jumpers,

because someone must have realized the stitching was of steelite fibre, which it was.

I picked up a couple of the heaters and tried the outer air-lock door. It swung in easily.

I stood inside the dome with my two heaters and the reaction set in. I started to laugh. A dozen big strong men sat about, half naked and afraid in their underwear, and over in a corner stood Gramps and Clair, also down to their scanties.

The biggest of the twelve men said, "I'm Reardon. Thank you. Thank you, sir . . ."

"Shut up," I told him. I waved my heater and he shut up.

"We've had to do it, too," Clair said, running into my arms, pulling off my helmet and kissing me. I threw one of the heaters to Gramps, and Clair was speaking again, "I almost laughed and spoiled the whole thing, but Gramps and I took off our jumpers, too, to make it look good. In fact, Gramps gave them the idea."

Good old Gramps . . .

GRAMPS donned his spacesuit and so did Clair, and Reardon, still not comprehending, mumbled his thanks. I explored the inside of the dome thoroughly, making sure there were no hidden weapons. Then I stepped through the lock with Clair and Gramps, and I closed the outer door. I notched my heater to low intensity and fused the door and the dome into one piece. They'd need a heater or a disintegrator to get out,

and they didn't have either.

Clair was smiling happily, now. But Gramps had a frown on his face.

"So what do we do with 'em?"

"Simple," I replied. "We wait for the government ship. It'll be here in a few weeks. They're not going anywhere in the meantime."

Gramps continued to frown. "You think we oughta report what they was lookin' for? The Ruskie weapon, I mean . . ."

I laughed. "That won't be necessary, Gramps. We'll do even better than that. We'll tell them what the weapon is."

Clair looked at me dumbfounded and I found myself grinning at both her and Gramps.

"Jerry! You can't be serious—we didn't really find the weapon!"

"We not only found it, we used it, hon," I told her. "I did some fast thinking while I was up on the rocks before. In a way I was in the same boat the Ruskies were when we beat them. I had to use desperate means—anything I could, and mainly something that would start fear, a panic . . ."

"But I don't see—" Clair was confused.

"The Ruskies had a powerful weapon, all right," I replied. "The only trouble was they used it too late. Fortunately for us we still had time—and our opponents weren't too bright mentally anyway. If they had been it might not have worked. Matter of fact, that's the big thing that licked the Ruskies. We were a bit too shrewd for them. Our military

leaders saw right through their weapon."

Gramps stamped his foot angrily. "Now look here, Jerry! Stop ramblin' around like that! Just what weapon you talkin' about?"

"Propaganda, Gramps. Propagan-

da, the greatest weapon in the universe—if used right. Now what do you say we get down to work and mine some copper?"

We were all laughing as we made our way to the other dome.

THE END

The Editorial

(Continued from Page 5)

"Rocket-ship X-M" hit the theaters before "Destination Moon" which had quite a bit of advance billing. X-M did a land-office business. "Destination Moon" did not apparently achieve the heights of popularity expected. As far as we can see the reason for this was that DM concentrated too much on the technical side instead of the story side. Then suddenly along came "The Thing" and it sported as gripping a suspense story as you'll find anywhere. The theaters were packed and the queues in front of them were significant.

SO we say let's get our collective noses out of the stratosphere. Science fiction was never meant to be an educational *tour de force*. The so-called adult story is nothing more than an attempt to show the reader how dumb he is and how smart the editor is. We think the readers are a lot smarter than the critics give them credit for being. We might even say they're one hell of a lot smarter! The time has come to drop this snobbish attitude in science fiction. If it isn't dropped the public will turn away and go back to westerns or detectives or anything else that appeals to escapist entertainment.

FORTUNATELY other editors realize this too. Howard Browne, of AS & FA presented a good case of the subject in his August editorial. It is gratifying to know that his magazines, like IMAGINATION, will continue to cater to the readers of science fiction and not the critics who remain loftily ensconced in their ivory towers. Ray Palmer of OW is another top editor who will slant his magazine toward the readers. These men know, from experience, as does your own editor, that entertainment is the one guarantee the reader expects for the purchase price he pays at the newsstand.

SO we're going on record right now with IMAGINATION. We don't intend to force intellectual nonsense on you, our readers. We're convinced you can do your own thinking and further that it would be an insult to infer that you can't. Science fiction readers are mentally adult or they wouldn't be reading it! And that goes for the great new audience swinging into the field. It goes as well for the movies, radio and television. Let's take off the makeup and get to the real article—entertainment. A story may not have to be what the critics call "space opera" to be en-

tainment. We don't say that at all. But let's cut out the snooty disdain that currently exists in some minds for anything but a story that will show mankind the path to ultimate Utopia. What we need is a little relaxation. And entertaining reading is one way to get it.

THE cover story this issue is a good example of what we mean. Geoff St. Reynard is one of the best writers in the field, not to mention the fact that his serious novels are brought out by Rinehart under his real name, Robert W. Kreppe. (*The Field of Night, In The Courts of the Lion, etc.*) Geoff knows how to write an entertaining story. He knows how to put characterization, mood, action, and suspense into a well-built story that will leave you calling for more. "Beware The Usurpers!" is the brilliant sequel to his now famed "The Usurpers" which we ran in FA when we edited that magazine early last year. Geoff asked us if we'd like to have him do a sequel to it for IMAGINATION. We told him to go ahead, and we think it's one of the finest stories we've ever read. Let us know how you like it.

A WORD about our cover this issue. Ever since Malcolm Smith presented the photo-dyed cover on the April issue, which oddly enough was for another St. Reynard story, we've received requests for another photo cover. Here it is. We liked it so much we suggested to Malcolm that he enter it in the annual Art Directors' contest. We'll let you know when it wins first prize!

NEXT issue we're presenting a terrific novel by Kris Neville, written especially for Madge. The title of the story is SPECIAL DE-

LIVERY and it packs a wallop you will remember for a long time. When we say the suspense is terrific we mean it. The cover was painted from a symbolic idea behind the story and we're sure you'll like it too. It's the first cover, interior artist Bill Terry has done for any magazine, and we think Bill will be doing a lot of them from now on!

WE'VE also found a terrific new writer. His name is Daniel F. Galouye and he has written a novel that is worthy of feature presentation in an early issue. Watch for the announcement on *Tonight The Sky Will Fall* . . .

AND we can't forget our charming dream-girl, *Taffer!* She, Marc Pillsworth, and the inimitable ghost, George, will be back shortly in a new novel length story. You'll have yourself a zany time, with more laughs than you can count!

WHICH winds up shop for this issue. See you at the newsstands promptly the first week in November. . . . with



"I had to spank him—he was good today."



Conducted by Mari Wolf

LOTS of people are awfully hard to convert to science fiction and fantasy. Some of them may even be hopeless. Like a friend of mine who thinks that fans are crazy, sf writers are crazier still, and science fiction is "all about little pink people who do impossible things." I don't argue with him, as he doesn't like to read about people anyway. Only about horses.

Of course, in time you can get a lot of your friends interested in science fiction. It's a simple process, really. You start in by leaving your copy of *IMAGINATION* lying out where a friend can see it, with guarded references to such-and-such a story, and pretty soon he will pick up the magazine to find out just what it's all about. And a little later he'll be raving about it as only a new fan can rave . . .

But you don't have to wait until your friends are converted in order to have someone to talk about science fiction with. Maybe you don't know any other sf enthusiasts in

your neighborhood, but there are probably quite a few of them. And probably they've organized some sort of fan club.

The clubs vary, of course. Some consist of a half dozen fans meeting in each other's homes for coffee and cookies and a discussion of science fiction. Others are citywide affairs, with permanent club rooms and regular meetings with parliamentary procedure and guest speakers. But east coast or west, city or small town, you'll find the same fan spirit.

I've been to several different organizations, both on the Pacific Coast and here in New York, and I'd like to tell you a little about them, and what you'd find if you dropped in for a visit.

I'll start with Los Angeles, as that's where I first met fandom. Besides, the LASFS, or Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, is one of the largest and most active of local fan organizations. It has a permanent clubroom at 1205 West Ingraham Street, and holds meetings

there every week, on Thursday night, unless the schedule has been changed since I left there last autumn.

Meetings at LASFS are what you might call semi-formal. That is, the club has a director who presides over the meetings, a secretary and treasurer and other officers, and it holds regular business meetings at the start of its sessions. But it's not stiff by any means. There's a lot of group discussion and a lot of just plain visiting among fans who haven't seen each other all week.

I'm not sure just what time the meetings start. I think it's eight o'clock, but it might be eight thirty. Anyway, we always went early so we'd have time for a little extra visiting. Allan Hershey was the director then, and invariably someone would buttonhole him and start a conversation that would carry over into official meeting hours. Then, if there was any business to conduct, it was quite a task to get everyone to sit still long enough to conduct it. It was the kind of meeting that was loads of fun, always.

Sometimes there'd be a guest speaker, some writer or out of town fan, but a lot of times the club members themselves would put on skits or tell about non-fan activities. And once a month there were the coffee and doughnut sessions . . . I wonder if they've kept those up?

The LASFS has its own mimeograph and puts out its fanzine, *Shangri-La*, or *Shaggy*. A different group edits it each time. That way everyone gets in on the work and no one clique can take over and run the zine to suit itself. And since the club is a large one, with both senior and junior members, the rotating editorship keeps everyone interested and gives everyone a chance to try out his own ideas.

SOME of the most prominent names in fandom—and among professional writers too — are either LASFS members or attend meetings there. There's Rick Sazary, leading fan and president of the NFFF — the National Fantasy Fan Federation, the largest of all fan groups. There's Forest J. Ackerman, an old time fan and now a writer's agent. There's E. E. Evans, who's a writer now and a fan still. There's Kris Neville. And of course, one of the old time LASFSers—Ray Bradbury.

So if you're in the Los Angeles area and haven't been to a LASFS meeting, why not drop in some Thursday night? You can find out more about it by writing to Walter Daugherty at the club address, 1305 West Ingraham, Los Angeles 14.

Of course, if you're in the Los Angeles area you'll undoubtedly hear a lot about the Outlanders. I could write a whole column about the club, of which I'm a member, but I won't, since we're not exactly a regular fan club. We're a small social group, who spend a good deal of our time writing letters to each other and meet whenever possible in each other's homes for a visit. We usually don't spend much time talking about science fiction, since we all belong to other fan organizations. Right now, the Outlanders are quite scattered. I guess I'm still the farthest from home, though.

Here in the New York area there are two main fan groups—the ESFA, or Eastern Science Fiction Association, in Newark, and the Queens Science Fiction League in New York City. Their membership doesn't overlap. Rog and I have attended meetings at both clubs. I don't know if they were typical meetings, but I enjoyed them both thoroughly. Maybe because the guest speaker at each

one was Rog Phillips . . .

ESFA members come from all over the New York metropolitan area, though most of them are New Jersey residents. The meetings are formal. They're held once a month and usually have guest speakers from among the New York writers and editors. They're held on Sunday afternoon—I think it's the first Sunday of the month, but I'm not sure.

The day we went it was raining hard, but even so quite a group had turned out. It started off with a business meeting and ended with Rog's speech—which wasn't a speech, really. I love Rog's talks. He gets up and says, "Any questions?", and spends the next hour answering all sorts of queries about science fiction and writing in general.

After the meeting the club officers took us to dinner and we all talked some more. I met so many people that afternoon that I can't get them all straight. Anyway, they were all fans and you'd like them.

I couldn't tell you how to get there, either. I've never yet learned to find my way around Long Island, and New Jersey is even worse. Here in Flushing the sun and moon rise in the north—you just come out and take a look! Anyhow, if you're in the Metropolitan area and would like to find out more about ESFA I'd suggest you write to Jimmy Taurasi of Fantasy-Times at 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing, Long Island, New York. He's an ESFA member and can tell you all about it.

We hadn't been here in Flushing very long when we were invited down to the Queens Science Fiction League. Rog answered some questions there, too. It's a smaller group, meeting in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Will Sykora in Long Island City. Will Sykora is an old time fan who has gathered together

quite a group of young fans who hold regular meetings and have a lot of fun. And after the meetings Mrs. Sykora serves a big spaghetti dinner for those who want to stay and chat on into the evening. The day we were there Rog talked and Frank Belknap Long dropped in and talked also and then after the meeting we all ate and kept right on talking way into the night.

The QSFL has its own mimeograph machine and the members run off their fan sheets there. Quite a few of them write. They take their writing seriously and really work at it—and they turn out some very good stories, too.

If you're interested in the QSFL I'd suggest you write Will Sykora at P. O. Box 4, Steinway Station, Long Island City, New York.

There are lots of other fan clubs. You'll find them in just about every city, and in a lot of small towns also. If you don't have one where you live, and wish you did, you could always start one. It's easy. You just convert your friends to science fiction . . .

Which brings me back where I started from. So it's a good time to go on to the fanzines for this Box . . .

* * *

First there's the FAN DIRECTORY. This isn't a fanzine. It's just what it says—a listing of as many known fans as could be located. It's arranged by states, so that to find out who the fans are in your area all you have to do is look under your state heading and—there you have them. Names and addresses, whether male or female, and what organizations they belong to.

The Fan Directory is really valuable. I use mine all the time to check addresses. It's the work of a

couple of my fellow Outlanders, and it's an excellent job. The editor is Len Moffatt, who went to all the trouble of collecting and sorting out the names and setting up the directory. The publisher is Stan Woolston, who ran off the copies on his Lilliputian Press at Garden Grove, California. They really did an excellent job.

It's something you should have. And it costs only 25c. You can send for your copy to Leonard J. Moffatt, 5949 Lanto St., Bell Gardens, California.

* * *

The CINVENTION MEMORY BOOK—it's not a fanzine either. It's a big, 96-page, beautifully done book commemorating the 1949 World Science Fiction Convention at Cincinnati. It's a must for everyone who was there—and if you weren't there you'll still find it fascinating. Sort of a picture, in words, of what a science fiction convention really is.

I didn't go to the Cinvention, but I've heard a lot about it. And now that I've been reading the Memory Book I feel that I was there, after all . . .

Quite a few of the speeches at the Cinvention, made by guest writers and editors and publishers, were taken down on tape recorders and later typed up for publication here. And besides the speeches there are accounts of the Cinvention as it was actually experienced, day by day. The contents page reads like a page out of *Who's Who* in the sf world. Lloyd Kabbach, Lester del Rey, Jack Williamson, E. E. Smith, Fritz Leiber, Bob Tucker, Ray Palmer, Rog Phillips (familiar name, that last . . .) and many, many more.

Don Ford, Stan Skirvin, Roy Lavender, and Lou Tabakow put out the Memory Book, and they really did a wonderful job. It's a limited edi-

tion—500 copies. So if you want yours you'd best write it right away for it. It's only a dollar, and more than worth it.

Send for your copy to the publisher, Don Ford, Box 116, Sharonville, Ohio.

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES. The science fiction newsmagazine published twice a month by Fandom House and edited by James Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing, Long Island, New York.

Right now I'm looking at the second March issue, which carries, among other news items, the report that Rog Phillips' *Time Trap* is now running as a newspaper serial. We'll have to get hold of one of the papers and see how they cut it . . .

There's lots of other news, as always in this newsmagazine. Somehow Fantasy Times manages to keep up on just about everything everywhere that's of special interest to fantasy fans. If you want to find out what's new in the science fiction world now, send 10c to James Taurasi. I'll bet you'll end as a regular subscriber.

* * *

Well, that seems to scrape the bottom of the Box, so I guess I'll close it up for now. Remember, if you have a fanzine you'd like reviewed, or club activities you'd like to tell about, send the zine or information to the Box. It's Mari Wolf, FANDORA'S BOX, c/o IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. Please don't send them to Flushing, as we won't be here then. In fact, we'll be heading westward just a few days from the time I'm writing this, and who knows where we'll be by the time you read it? Well, we should be used by now to having our mail follow us hopefully around the country . . .

See you next issue!

— MARI WOLF

Letters from the Readers

A NEATER FORMAT

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I just want to say a few things about the June issue of IMAGINATION. I like the new format. It really looks swell. And for the first time I liked a Bok cover.

Another thing, FANDORA'S BOX is a great idea! But make it a lot longer in future issues.

As for the stories, I have read only two of them so far. The only reason being that I haven't had time for much reading.

BEYOND THE ULTRA-VIOLET by Frank M. Robinson is the best story in the issue—I know that without going any further! No one could top Robinson's story. Please get more yarns by Robinson.

The other story I read was James Blish's THE VOID IS MY COFFIN. It was also a very good story. If the rest of the yarns in the issue are as good as these two you'll have a tough job bringing out a better issue than the June number. For that matter that goes for any other magazine on the market!

How about putting a section in Madge for the biography of the author of the cover story each issue.

Knowing about the author of the stories you read makes it more interesting.

One more thing, I would like to see serials.

Charles Nuetzel
16452 Moorpark St.
Encino, Cal.

We're glad you like the new format so well, Chuck. As to the biography idea—turn to page two with

ONE MAN'S OPINION . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I write you to voice my protest against your preposterous criticism of DESTINATION MOON in your reply to Mrs. Dorothy Hansen's letter in the June IMAGINATION.

"The story was so incidental as to be non-existent . . . the characters . . . weren't people with problems you could sympathize with . . . (Hollywood should have provided) a good dramatic story . . ." Good Lord, man, what kind of words are these to come from the editor of a science fiction magazine! But let's take up these pseudo critical commentaries one by one.

1. *The story.*—The central conflict in the story of the film is, of course

the success or failure of the protagonists in their attempt to reach the Moon. The antagonist who opposes the "heroes" is nature herself. While the pitting of human protagonists against an impersonal antagonist is an unusual story device, it is certainly not unprecedented in good literature and drama. Melville's *Moby Dick* is an example; most of H. G. Wells' science fiction stories (immeasurably superior to the trash published currently under the misleading title of science fiction) use such a plot; Karel Capek's *War With the Nicots*, a novel of real literary merit, is analogous to DESTINATION MOON in plot.

To those of us who are truly interested in the coming conquest of space (among us there are first-rate scientists such as Werher von Braun and Wolfgang Steurer, who are actually attempting to implement the Earth-Satellite program of our government) the conflict of man with space is an exciting and fascinating prospect. Far more exciting than a trite boy-meets-girl tale or a neurotic-finds-himself-through-trial narrative or a moralistic be-good-or-you'll-be-like-the-Martians-someday yarn.

2. *Dramatic Interest.*—If the conquest of space doesn't have dramatic interest, what has? The first trip to the Moon certainly has as much dramatic interest as Columbus' initial voyage to America, which as you know, has been the subject of innumerable works of historical fiction.

The sort of attitude toward science fiction that is reflected in your criticism of DESTINATION MOON is, in my opinion, largely responsible for the watered-down pap that has been foisted on readers under the guise of sf lately. The formula for this second-rate trash seems to be take a conventional boy-meets-girl

story written for the *Ladies' Home Journal* in the 1920s; change the locale from Podunk, Iowa, to Mars; change the hero's convertible into a space ship; dress all characters in space suits; publish in any science fiction magazine, along with comments from a proud editor as to how he avoids bug-eyed monsters, lack of conventional human-interest, and, indeed, anything else traditionally accepted in good science fiction.

In closing, if this letter gets published, I wonder what kind of a flip-pant title you'll put on it. "If you haven't got a case, call your opponent names."

John M. Sharp
Dept. of Modern Languages
Texas Western College
El Paso, Texas

You hit it on the head when you speak of a lack of human interest—that's exactly what we meant by saying DM lacked a good dramatic story. It is our opinion, and we stand on it, that a story may concern an Earth-shaking idea or impending calamity, or challenge, etc. But if the story lacks human interest then it no longer serves the purpose it intended to—that of a STORY. We want to get in there and root and cheer for the hero and heroine against the villains and the odds on the villain's side. While the old gal Nature can be a villain at times, she's one we can't see, understand, or categorize in the realm of human emotion. Your interpretation of a dramatic story is different than ours. Ok, you're entitled to that opinion, just as we are entitled to ours. One thing though, the results of DM's box-office success would tend to indicate that we are right.

As to the merit of science fiction stories today, read the editorial in this issue.

Name calling? You've got the

wrong editor and the wrong magazine—we're all friends here—even if we do disagree with

NEW TO SCIENCE-FANTASY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Greetings and salutations to you from a new reader. I purchased my first copy (June issue) of IMAGINATION three days ago, and just finished reading the issue. I want to say right now that it is a good magazine and the stories are certainly what the title suggests. I am becoming interested in science-fantasy as a result of an interest in things occult and supernatural. Of course it is highly possible that my interest in science-fantasy might fade out later. Do you have any comments on this possibility?

I enjoyed the stories in the June issue. For example, I think that **THE MARTIANS AND THE COYS** was a very good humorous yarn. **HELL'S ANGEL** is an excellent piece of imagination and the ending was unexpected.

I'm looking forward to the next issue. Hope it's as good.

Wilbur Hune
417 6th Ave.
Palmetto, Fla

So you wonder if your interest in science-fantasy will fade? We'll bet you'll be joining a fox club—and maybe even contributing to fox-sires. Science-fantasy may not be a drug—but it really "hooks" you—and that's good! with

DIANETICS WORKS . . .

Dear Ed:

Whoever wrote the article on Dianetics in your June issue has evidently not tried Dianetics. Or perhaps there is another reason.

Hubbard made one mistake in his

book. He should have used capital letters, underscored, when he said, ". . . any intelligent person can, with study successfully use dianetic methods". So far as I have been able to observe, all of the so-called failures, of dianetics are brought about by very incompetent and even idiotic, auditing.

The stuff works when applied as directed.

Robert Howard
2615 Perkins Lane
Cincinnati, Ohio

We commented on dianetics and its "auditors" in the letter section of the September issue with

FOR SALE, ONE WIFE . . . ?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Where are the Canadian readers? Do you get mail from them? All I know is that sf and fantasy mags are always being gobbled up at the newsstands and yet I never see a letter from Canada?

There are lots of second-hand book and magazine stores up here. But when I visit them I find the sf mags gone. They disappear as fast as they arrive. Could it be that some Americans come up here and get them?

I buy all the sf & fantasy mags that come out here. The way the new books appear I'll soon go broke. I've got an enormous stack of mags all kinds old and new and my wife is raising the roof, although I must say the magazines are giving her good competition. Those interested in buying or exchanging, let me know.

June issue at hand, and I must say I totally disagree with J. F. Streiss. Especially his reference to "Galaxy". As far as I am concerned there is no comparison. Galaxy's editorial policy is too stiff and formal. No letters, etc. But enough of them!

I felt that **DOUBLE IDENTITY**

was the best story in the June issue. I find that too many of your yarns are humorous. Humor is good, but there is a limit. What we need is the occasional serious blood-and-thunder stuff. I like your advertising policy of advertising only products having to do with science-fantasy. I don't like magazines that tell me to go buy a truss or some such thing.

I would like to give you my sincere wishes for a very successful future. You've got a darn good magazine!

Al Rosen
4255 Maplewood Ave.
Montreal, Quebec
Canada

How about the scarcity of Canadian readers-letters — we know you're up there, gung! . . . As to your wife—why not get her reading those stf magazines. She doesn't know what she's missing! . . . with

GET THAT DICTIONARY!

Dear Ed:

Hooray for Mrs. Hansen! She really has an idea there in a dictionary of stf terms. It would truly be a boon to science fiction. It's a good opportunity for someone.

While I'm at it I'll comment on some of the June issue. The cover was great, but then Bok always is.

HELL'S ANGEL—not the greatest story ever told but one well worth reading.

THE MARTIANS AND THE COYS—ok by me! Kind of off the subject but humorous.

DOUBLE IDENTITY — a new twist and really good!

I guess I'm one of those readers who like more humorous stories. That's one reason I got a kick out of Mack Reynolds' tale. In referring to Superman, the Lone Ranger, etc., it might at first seem silly and childish, but to a Martian it would

not be funny.

Well, guess I'll get back to reading the rest of Madge!

Gerald Hibbs

Detroit Lakes, Minn.

That science-fiction dictionary was reported on more fully in the September issue . . . with

SHADES OF AMAZING, YET!

Dear Ed:

I have just finished reading the June issue of IMAGINATION, and except for the nice Bok cover and the digest size of the book I thought it smacked somewhat of AMAZING STORIES. Isn't that blasphemous? It's true, though. Look for yourself? —The likes and story headings, etc. But maybe it's complimentary to say Madge bears a superficial resemblance to good old AMAZING. Anyway, I like Madge so I guess it has succeeded in its intent, if it proposed to snare me as a steady reader!

The cover was very good. I have always liked Bok. And the story, HELL'S ANGEL . . . Robert Bloch can certainly turn in a nice job. The other stories were all familiarly average, nothing brilliant, nothing conspicuously a flop, just comfortable reading. Charles Myers turned out the possible exception.

Maybe Myers should stop wasting his talents on those vapid "Toffee" yarns. Shades of Thorne Smith! Look at all the people I've angered . . . But when you've read one "Toffee" story you've read them all, haven't you? But I guess repetition pays off. Look at Autry and Hopalong!

How much further can this business go of making our stf magazines look like the *Reader's Digest*? I suppose they are more dignified. Whatever that is! All this flurry about a mag a man doesn't have to hide out

with! If I ever get a PhD and still haven't learned not to be ashamed to be seen in company with a magazine with ragged edges and a nude fem on the cover I'll think I'm the victim of a hoax instead of an education. So if you can make Madge sit on the Look shelf it's still ok with me. If I like it I'll buy it anyway.

Ivan H. Copas
R.F.D. No. 3
Peebles, Ohio

Nope we aren't insulted to be compared with AS, or especially FA for that matter. After editing those books for five years we're more than a bit fond of them! . . . Vapid "Taf-fee" stories, you say? By the hounds of Pluto, it's about blusters of damn, sir! And what's all this fuss about nudes, ragged edges, etc.? The neat, attractive appearance of Madge is not meant to be sexy or sexy in tone. Maybe some other mags make those claims—we just happen to like this format. And as to fems on the cover, sure you'll see them here occasionally. But at the same time we'll try and give you some nice "different" cover presentations. Like this issue, for instance. A photo-dyed print. Like it? ————— with

SILENT NO LONGER!

Dear Ed:

So far I have been a silent, but appreciative fan, but Madge is such a fine magazine that I've got to tell you about it.

As near as any mag could be, I'll say it's perfect. I only see lacking the supernatural terror of H.P. Lovecraft. Even so, Madge is the T-O-P mag in science fiction. Keep it as such! . . . You know, IMAGINATION is the one magazine I can feel safe in buying without looking for your authors' names.

In the June issue I rate HELL'S

ANGEL and DOUBLE IDENTITY as a tie. It's always a pleasure to see Myers. In 3rd place I put MARTIANS AND THE COYS. Really clever. The rest of the stories I'd group into 4th position.

FANDORA'S BOX and The Editorial are always interesting. Departments I usually skip in any other magazine.

Your covers are good, even this month's although I don't favor cheesecake on an angel. You might pass along to Bok that angels, contrary to common belief, are not deceased humans and are referred to in the Bible as being of male gender.

I agree with Jan Romanoff that the short factual features are entirely unnecessary. I'd also like to echo Mrs. Hansen's plea for an sf dictionary. Excellent idea.

Now I'll light a cigar and settle down to some excellent re-reading. Maybe soon we'll be reading more of Myers and Annas? Huh?

M. C. Fichlesimer, Jr.
Pfc — USAF
4012 A&EM Sqdrn
Biggs AFB, Texas

You've just given us two of the biggest compliments a science-fantasy editor can get. You know the contents will be good, regardless of the author's name, and you re-read the issue. They say only officers rate a salute—but here's one, from us to you! ————— with

IT WAS A GREAT DAY!

Dear Ed:

IMAGINATION is like "The Thing" from another planet! It is different, amazing, and holds your interest. The stories are superb and I must say that your covers strike the eye. What a great day it was when IMAGINATION hit the newsstands! It will go down as an event

in science fiction annals. It is worth much more than the cover price.

Bless you for leaving out the type of advertising so many other magazines cater to . . .

In the June issue HELL'S ANGEL was A-1 with me. Keep printing good stories like that. The letter from J. F. Streinz of Atlanta, Georgia, was very un-called for. People have the right to express their opinions, but he better take another look at IMAGINATION. I read *Galaxy* too, but it certainly does not surpass Madge. *Galaxy* has no Reader's Page or any departments such as our outstanding Madgo! *Galaxy* also runs serials which are definitely off my list. A person's interest in a story lessens when he has to wait for another chapter or part. A good feature in Madge is that the stories are all complete. Keep serials out of the magazine!

I have been a science fiction fan for several years and I am also interested in astronomy. Would appreciate getting in touch with any person who also has a tape-recorder as I record all stf dramatized on the radio. I'd like to exchange tapes by mail.

In conclusion may I say, Mr. Hamling, that you should be proud of your magazine. Here's hoping for the day it will go monthly!

Al K. Bender

P.O. Box 241

Bridgeport 1, Conn.

Proud of Madge, Al? All we know is we have to wear sweaters instead of shirts—the darned buttons keep popping off ————— with

BLESS THAT NEIGHBOR!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is my first attempt at a fan letter of any kind, so forgive me if I ramble a bit.

First, congratulations on the new format of your very interesting and entertaining magazine. My first experience with Madge was the February issue and I didn't particularly care for the cover format then. Of course, I'm not a qualified critic, but you wanted reactions to the new format, and I'm in favor of it.

I notice that one of the readers in the letter department suggests cutting down on the fact articles. I take exception to this. The fact articles are a very important part of science fiction reading, to me. They tend to keep the reader abreast of current developments in the various fields of research and often show practical applications of things that have been predicted in a science fiction story. I say keep them up, and especially to the standard you showed in the June issue.

I might add here that my husband scoffs at science fiction, he being a very hard-headed realist. I tell him he'll be surprised when space flight and television are actualities.

Charles F. Myers does bid fair to fill the shoes of the master, Thorne Smith. His "Teffee" series and DOUBLE IDENTITY in the June issue are wonderful. Here's wishing him a long and profitable career.

As to what one reader says about looking to *Galaxy*, well, I read *Galaxy* too, and enjoy it very much. Both the monthly issue and the bi-monthly novel. I'm saving every copy, both of your magazine and *Galaxy*, and I hope someday to have a complete and informative library of them. Is there any better recommendation for a magazine of any kind?

Your discussion of the reaction to DESTINATION MOON I found very enjoyable. I noticed the same thing when I saw the picture. It seems that some people are so shallow they cannot appreciate the drama of hu-

man endeavor and experience.

I seem to have covered just about everything I had in mind. Again, congratulations on the fine job you are doing with *Madge*. I've been reading science fiction for almost four years after being introduced to it by a neighbor, and I'll be reading *IMAGINATION* as long as the magazine is worth it—which I'm sure will be for a long time.

Mrs. Frances Rand
General Delivery
Harrisburg, Pa.

We're glad you like the fact articles. We also feel they have their place in a good science fiction magazine. And say, get that husband of yours to read an issue of Madge—see! bet he'll be pleasantly surprised with science fiction. Let him read the cover story this issue, for a start. And write again . . . with

A PLEASANT DISCOVERY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

—A first letter-to-the-editor from an ardent stf fan of a year's standing.

Please accept my sincere congratulations and my real gratitude for *Imagination*. Your magazine (my magazine!) presents a refreshing contrast to the jaded content offered by the better portion of your competitors.

You have added maturity and freshness, depth and truly adult entertainment. Thank you for thought-provoking stories and articles; for craftsmanlike editing. Special congratulations for the absence of routine space-opera with its pitiable immature plot and lamentable jargon. Conspicuous by omission are pot-boilers by "famous" names in the field.

I discovered *Madge* only last month, but miniature masterpieces

like *HUNGRY HOUSE* and *BEYOND THE FEARFUL FOREST* kept me on tenterhooks for June's issue. I was not disappointed.

Your title is evidently your editorial creed—here's to you and your *IMAGINATION*!

Gerald Whalen
617 East Front St.
Traverse City, Mich.

Here's to future issues, Gerald, and we promise you they'll be even better! . . . with

AND HE LOOKED AND LOOKED

Dear Bill:

The renovation of *Madge* came as a pleasant surprise and shock. After looking high and low for the "old" *Madge*, I had just about given up when the newsdealer said: "One of your magazines came in today." He then handed me the June issue of *Madge*. Wiping the shocked look off my face I paid him and went home to read it. I arrived at the following conclusions.

The Bek cover was excellent.

So far I've read only the two long stories. Bloch's short novel came out on top. He isn't prolific, but when he does write one, you can be sure the fans will like it. Myers' was quite good. However, he seems to be at his best when doing a "Teffee." (Hint!)

Increased length of the Reader's Page noted and approved. Several comment provoking letters therein.

To J. F. Streinz: At least you are unique. Didn't like "Teffee" eh? Boy, are you lonely! As to your closing comment, "Take a good look at *Galaxy*," there are two sides to that. While *Galaxy* is without a doubt one of the leading, if not the leading magazine in the field, it still has certain barriers to overcome. For

(Continued on Page 160)

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Gentlemen: I enclose \$. check money order.
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☐ **SPACE ON MY HANDS** *By Fredric Brown.* \$2.50.
☐ **BEYOND THESE WALLS** *By Rena M. Vale.* \$3.50.

NAME

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CITY..... ZONE.... STATE.....

(Continued from Page 158)

instance, Gold's insufferable bragging. He's constantly throwing at you the fact that *Galaxy* is so good. This is the type of thing that can cost a magazine readers.

Now a kick to you, Bill. In answering Esther Davis' letter, or rather, complaint, on REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR, you said "we'll watch that sort of thing in the future." First, I think most of the readers understood it. Just because Esther Davis didn't is no reason to bar future stories of this type. In fact, it would be going against your own policy of giving the readers what they want. I hope you will revise that statement or at least clear it up.

Jan Romanoff

26601 S. Western, Apt. 341
Lomita, Cal.

We stand revised with

A TERRIFYING TALE

Dear Bill:

The ending to the Robinson story in the June issue was the most terrifying I've ever read in any science-fantasy magazine. The other stories will be adequately commented on by other readers so I'll refrain from any further comment.

But I absolutely, definitely, certainly do NOT like the new cover policy. The sooner you get back to the mere artistic old style, the happier I'll be. Making the magazine easier to find is no good excuse, either. After all, isn't Madge worth hunting for?

James Lynch
2630 Penn Ave., N.
Minneapolis, Minn.

We're glad you liked the Robinson story. We thought it was a very good story too. As to the cover format, aw, come on, isn't it really

better, now that you've seen it for a few issues? with

WANTS BETTER MOVIES

Dear Mr. Hamling:

The June issue of IMAGINATION was very good. Especially liked the new cover design and the better grade of paper inside the book. The Bok cover painting was swell. Let's have more by him.

HELL'S ANGEL was amazing. I especially liked the way Bloch wrote it. DOUBLE IDENTITY was a fine idea, well written too. The rest of the stories were ok, but I liked the above two the best.

I agree with you about DESTINATION MOON. I'm afraid I'm one of those people who rather sneered at it. It was nice to look at, and was, as far as I know, scientifically accurate. But it was no more than a Popular Science thing as far as the story went. If Hollywood keeps making science fiction movies like that I'll continue to prefer pictures like KIM, TREASURE ISLAND, DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS, etc. The trouble with *Weird Tales* is, as you say, that they published good stories in the years gone by. I think the mag is in a rut today.

J. T. Oliver
315 27th St.
Columbus, Ga.

Speaking of movies, have you seen *THE THING* yet? Now there's an example of what Hollywood can really do with science fiction. For our money *THE THING* is the best science fiction film ever made. The suspense in that film is terrific. We were on the edge of our seat every moment. And the story that went with the suspense was very good. The characterization was above reproach. And all in all it was

(Continued on Page 162)

'NOTHING BUT THE BEST'

SPECIAL DELIVERY! by Kris Neville

NO TIME FOR TOFFEE! by Charles F. Myers

DARK DESTINY! by Dwight V. Swain

TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! by Daniel F. Galouye

Yes, these are only some of the GREAT novels that are coming up in future issues of IMAGINATION. Novels by the top names in the field! You'll be reading Kris Neville's great new classic, SPECIAL DELIVERY next issue, and others in forthcoming issues. Which brings us to the big point: why not make sure you receive your copy — many of our readers complain that their newsstand is sold out by the time they get there. You can eliminate this possibility and at the same time receive your copy promptly by subscribing. Don't miss an issue!

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(Continued from Page 160)

and is a fine contribution to science fiction . . . And of course the proof is in the pudding and that film is playing to packed houses everywhere. If you missed it, dash to the nearest theater still playing it.

We also are anxiously awaiting the new science fiction film's opening here, *WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE*. We understand that it is a really terrific film. From all indications, Hollywood is finally putting some first-class effort into its productions . . . with

CAN'T PUT MADGE DOWN!

Dear Ed:

I missed the February issue of *IMAGINATION*, but I've read every other issue this year and to say that I've enjoyed each and every one would be a mild understatement.

I am a firm believer in space travel. I've seen *DESTINATION MOON & ROCKETSHIP XM*. Also, *THE THING*. Personally, I believe that by the movie companies making pictures such as these there will be a great many more people who will begin to think that space travel is not only possible—but probable!

I read every one of Thorne Smith's novels and I'm really sorry I missed Charles F. Myers' "Toffee" story in the February issue. I was wondering if you could possibly send me that back issue in which Toffee appeared.

I want to thank you for a very pleasant evening's entertainment — for I always finish *IMAGINATION* in one night. Who could put it down once it was picked up?

Natalie Palombe
18 Washington Ave.

Lake Hiawatha, N. J.

We agree with you about Hollywood, Natalie. The big thing of course is

that more and more people will become science fiction conscious. As to the February issue containing *THE VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE*, it's on the way to you right now! Let us know how you liked it. And watch for the new Toffee novel coming up soon . . . with

COVER NOT TOO HOT . . . ?

Dear Ed:

This is my first letter to any science fiction magazine. It concerns two recent issues of *IMAGINATION*.

First off, the April issue. What a beautiful cover! Malcolm Smith has done the best covers of all on Madge—and *Other Worlds*. As far as the stories go, all were good. But special thanks for publishing something by Ray Bradbury in April. His stuff is becoming more and more scarce.

DRINK MY RED BLOOD by Richard Matheson was unusual to say the least. More!

June Issue: This is an improvement in cover design? Frankly I like the cover layout formerly much better. About that Hannes Bok painting for *HELL'S ANGEL*. I don't see what's so hot about Bok. He's definitely not realistic. The guy at the controls looks like a ventriloquist's dummy.

IMAGINATION was just as easy to find at the newsstands before you splashed the name all the way across the cover. The new paper is nice though. How about changing the outside and keeping the inside?

Oh yes, *PANDORA'S BOX* is great!

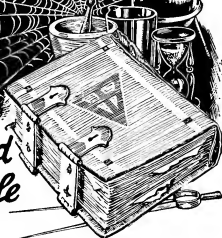
Jim Parry
R.F.D. No. 1 Taft Rd.
East Syracuse, N. Y.

How do you like Malcolm Smith's cover this issue? . . . with

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